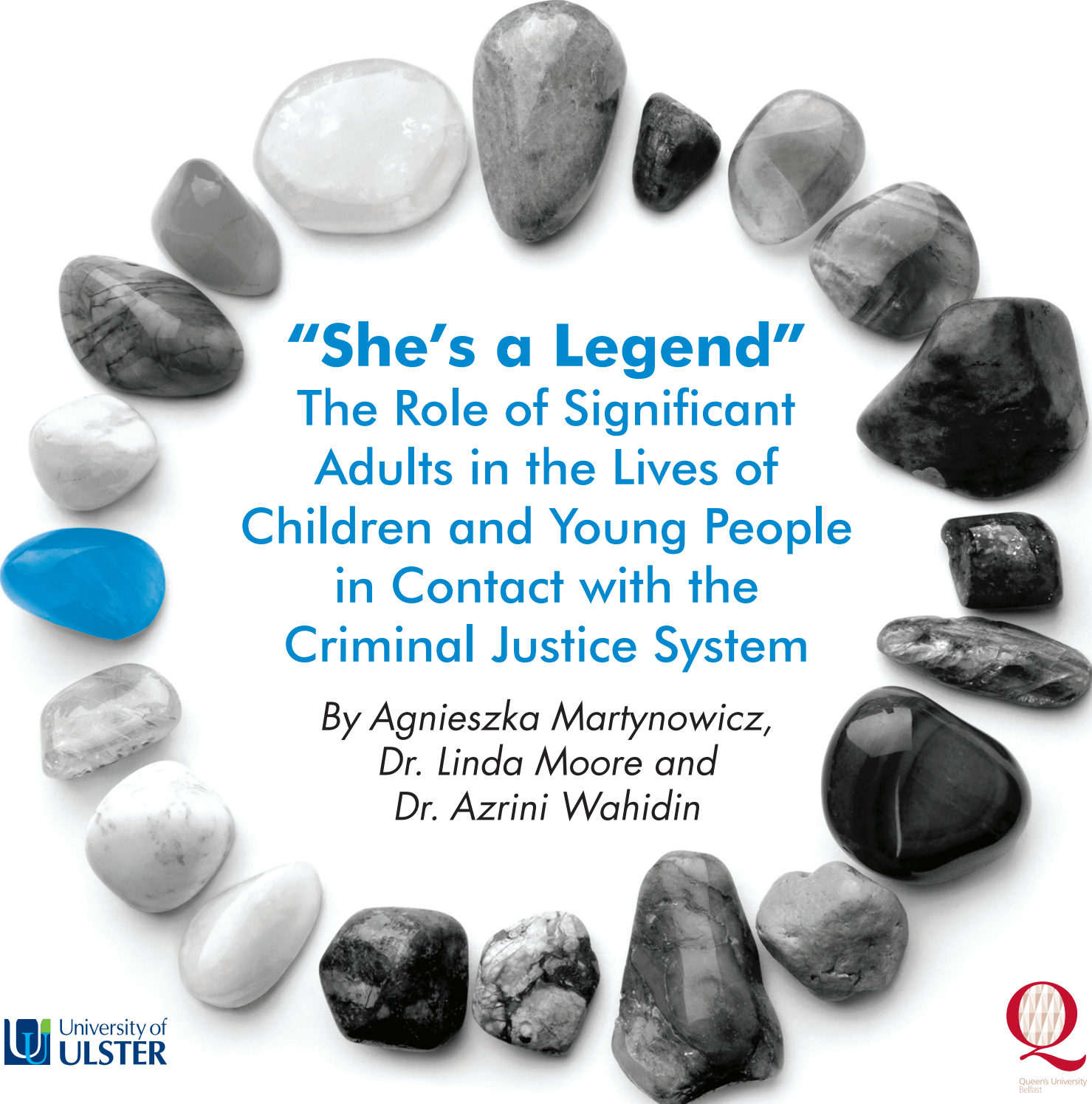# Children's Rights

NICCY
northern ireland commissioner
for children and young people

"She's a Legend"
The Role of Significant Adults in the Lives of Children and Young People in Contact with the Criminal Justice System

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FOREWORD

As the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), it is my primary aim, as set out in legislation, to 'promote and safeguard the rights and best interests of children and young people'. The United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC), upon which I base my work, is a comprehensive, international human rights treaty which enshrines specific children's rights and defines universal principles and standards for the treatment and status of children around the world. A number of the articles in the UNCRC relate to children and young people who may come into contact with the youth justice system. Article 40 outlines the rights of children in this circumstance, stating that they should be treated with dignity and respect, be able to benefit from all aspects of the due process of law, including legal assistance and a fair trial, and have their privacy respected at all times.

The often complex and challenging needs of children and young people in contact with the youth justice system in Northern Ireland has been highlighted in various government, inspectorate and research reports, and by a range of agencies working with children and young people across different sectors. It is widely recognised that many of these children may be very vulnerable, having potentially been affected by a number of issues including health-related problems, family breakdown, specific learning difficulties, poverty and social exclusion.

In such circumstances, the positive role which supportive adults can play in the lives of young people can be very significant. Research has highlighted the wide-ranging benefits of supportive relationships with 'significant adults' for children and young people, through the provision of mentoring, guidance and support.

Given the potentially positive impact of these relationships, I was interested to learn more about the role of 'significant adults' in the lives of children and young people in contact with the youth justice system in Northern Ireland, particularly from the perspective of young people.

I therefore commissioned a team of researchers from Queen's University and the University of Ulster to explore how such affirming relationships can positively impact on different aspects of young people's lives and support them in their personal development, engagement in education or training and in diverting them away from the youth justice system.

This Report captures the views and experiences of young people and their 'significant adults', as they describe what they value about these relationships and what they perceive to be the benefits. Young people also reflect upon what they feel they need from 'significant adults', for such relationships to be effective and meaningful. The authors emphasise the crucial importance of one-to-one support and mentoring for young people, particularly where previously, they have had little support. They also note that such support should be provided alongside universal services and advocacy for social justice for children and young people.

The Report outlines a series of recommendations which includes the need for sustainable, long-term funding for organisations providing mentoring support to young people, the importance of placing children's rights, and specifically the principles of participation and self-determination at the centre of all work and practice involving children and young people, and the continuing need to challenge negative stereotyping of children and young people and to promote more positive images of them across society.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the young people and 'significant adults' who shared their views and experiences with the research team during the project and to thank each of the organisations who facilitated and supported the team to carry out the research.

Patricia Lewsley-Mooney
Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
December 2012

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The experience of children and young people who come into contact with the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland is an issue which is of particular interest to the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), as it engages key children's rights and raises significant issues concerning their wellbeing and best interests.

2. Research indicates that many children and young people in conflict with the law have been affected by a myriad of issues, including poverty and social exclusion, family breakdown, mental health problems, drugs and alcohol and domestic violence. Significant proportions of children and young people are also care-experienced and have been or remain on the child protection register. Young people in Northern Ireland who come into contact with the criminal justice system share a range of difficulties experienced by young people in other jurisdictions, but added to this are issues related to the legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict, including experiences of violence and a lack of safety in communities. Many of these children and young people are therefore extremely vulnerable and the potential impact of contact with different adults on their lives can be very significant.

3. Children who have experience of the justice system are likely to come into contact with a range of adults who may play a supportive role, apart from parents or carers or other adult family members. These may include social workers, youth workers, community workers, community educators, teachers and volunteer mentors. Research has highlighted the positive impact that supportive relationships with 'significant adults' can have and children and young people themselves have identified the importance of adults in providing mentoring, guidance and support.

4. In February 2012, NICCY commissioned a study to look at the role that these adults can play in the lives of children who come into contact with the criminal justice system. Of particular interest to NICCY was how supportive, affirming relationships with 'significant adults' can positively influence different aspects of young people's lives and the extent to which they can support them in areas such as personal and emotional

development, education or training and diversion from the criminal justice system.

5. Many of the children and young people who participated in this research are amongst the most marginalised in society. Against a backdrop of often complicated family situations, they can struggle to engage in education and training, are often excluded from the job market, face difficulties with physical and mental health and can find it difficult to develop and sustain positive relationships with adults and peers.

6. This research has highlighted the important role that significant adults can play in helping young people to access their rights, for example, to appropriate accommodation, education, training and employment and health, welfare and leisure services. Young people value this support and stated that assistance is important in helping them make more positive choices about their lives.

7. Young people want the significant adults to be trust-worthy, reliable, 'straight talking' and honest and they value adults' commitment to the relationship with them. They also like the adults to be fun to be with.

8. Children and young people felt that they were negatively labelled by the media and politicians. They felt it was important that those adults who were significant to them believed in their positive qualities, recognised their potential and were consistent in their support.

9. The report concludes that one-to-one support is crucial for young people who have had little assistance in their lives and that projects which provide such help to young people play a very important role in that respect. While recognising the importance of mentoring and other individual work, this report argues that such support should be provided alongside universal services and advocacy for social justice for children and young people.

10. The following Recommendations are made:
a) There is a need to profile and disseminate information and research about the positive impact of relationships between significant adults and young people. It is important to highlight the good practice evidenced by youth and community workers and others and to bring this to the attention of key policy makers.

b) It is vital that organisations that give children and young people individual adult support are provided with sustainable, long-term statutory funding, particularly in times of austerity and as cuts are being made to budgets.

c) When measuring the effectiveness of projects, within the context of the expectations of funders, children and young people's views should be central to determining how 'success' is measured and indicators should accurately capture the significant steps young people take over time. This should include their perceptions of the steps they have taken on their life journeys and how their progress has been facilitated by the different projects and the adults who support them.

d) Criminal justice agencies working with young people should base their practice on the principle of encouraging young people to participate in decision making and promoting their self-determination. Examples of good practice in this regard should be documented, disseminated and actively promoted by key agencies.

e) Where relationships are developed with staff and volunteers working for structured programmes, adults should place the rights of children and young people at the centre of their practice. Training for adults working with children and young people should reflect this emphasis on rights.

f) Further research, including longitudinal research, should be undertaken into the role which significant adults can play in supporting children and young people to access their rights. Evaluations of and research on projects that involve building relationships between adults and young people, should consider rights as a core issue.

g) So far as possible, and when it is in the child's best interest, contact with family including extended family should be supported. Organisations which work to support the families of children in contact with the criminal justice system, including prisoners' families, should receive adequate resourcing from the Government.

h) There is a need to challenge negative stereotyping of children and young people, including those in conflict with the law. NICCY, through its work to date, recognises this as a priority area and this work should be continued and strengthened. Criminal justice agencies, the Executive, the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the media all have a responsibility to promote more positive images of children and young people, and to tackle discrimination against them.

i) NICCY should continue to research and draw attention to the structural disadvantage and discrimination faced by many children and young people in Northern Ireland and its impact on their development and life histories, including on the potential to be drawn into the criminal justice system.

INTRODUCTION

In February 2012, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) commissioned a study to look at the role that adults can play in the lives of children and young people who come into contact with the criminal justice system or who are at risk of such contact. Of particular interest to NICCY, was how supportive, affirming relationships with 'significant adults' can positively influence different aspects of young people's lives and the extent to which adults can support them in areas such as personal and emotional development, education or training and diversion from the criminal justice system.

Children who have experience of the criminal justice system are likely to come into contact with a range of adults who may play a supportive role, apart from parents or carers or other adult family members. These include, but are not limited to, social workers, youth workers, community workers, community educators, teachers and volunteer mentors. Research has highlighted the positive impact that supportive relationships with 'significant adults' can have and children and young people themselves have identified the importance of adults in providing mentoring, guidance and support (Beam et al, 2002). Adults can be important to young people as they can show them respect, provide emotional support, and engage them in various activities (ibid). Studies have also highlighted how resilient and positive qualities can be encouraged in young people through the presence of at least one caring adult in their lives (Greeson et al, 2010; Hurd and Zimmerman, 2010).

The interest in and development of mentoring programmes for young people, especially for those considered to be 'at risk', was in large part influenced by such research (DuBois et al, 2002). Indeed, in much of the literature on the role of significant adults, the relationship between them and children and young people is referred to as 'mentoring' defined as a 'social connection between a more experienced (and typically older) mentor and a less experienced mentee' (Hurd and Zimmerman, 2010, p37).

While mentoring has on occasion been criticised for concentrating too much on individual 'deficits' and 'pathology' (Piper and Piper, 2000) and ignoring the social contexts of young people's lives (Philip and Spratt, 2007), the use of mentoring programmes with young people in a variety of contexts has soared in the last 20

years or so. This includes the mentoring of children and young people who come into contact with the criminal justice system. Evaluations of the impact of mentoring relationships show that they can have a positive effect on children's physical and mental health, educational attainment and improve their life experience.

This report reflects on research into the role of 'significant adults' and presents the findings of a small-scale study undertaken with children and young people and the adults coming into their lives, in the context of their contact with the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland (NI). The findings of the research are analysed through the lens of children's rights, outlining the ways in which adults can assist children and young people in accessing their rights in everyday life.

Methodology
Literature review
In order to provide a background to the study, a literature review was conducted at the beginning of the research, looking at the definition of a 'significant adult', the nature and impact of relationships between children and young people and their significant adults and the impact of some more structured interventions, such as mentoring, on the development of children and young people. Furthermore, a review of children's rights standards was undertaken to inform the analysis of the findings. The literature review also encompassed an exploration of policy, practice and children's rights compliance in Northern Ireland in the context of the criminal justice system.

Interviews and focus groups
In total, 20 children and young people were interviewed for this research, of which five were girls or young women, and 15 were boys or young men. The young people were all aged 14 to 25, apart from one who was 30 and therefore able to reflect on their experiences earlier in life. The sample of children and young people was designed so as to include those with different backgrounds (for example, those who were care-experienced; excluded from formal education; who had experience of custodial settings, etc) and different examples of interventions provided – educational support, mentoring, advice, restorative justice, etc. The sample was balanced so as to include both boys and girls of different ages and also to include children and young people from urban and rural areas.

Access to children and young people, as well as adult workers and volunteers, was facilitated by the Youth Justice Agency (including Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre (JJC)), Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Reintegration of Offenders (NIACRO), Include Youth, the Prince's Trust, NI Alternatives, Barnardo's, Opportunity Youth and Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC). Additional information from young people was provided in writing by Include Youth, which conducted consultations in JJC and Hydebank Wood Young Offender Centre (YOC) with boys and young men held in custody.

To gather the views of adults, interviews were held with 22 workers and volunteers who played significant support roles in the lives of children and young people in a variety of settings; through education and training and employment programmes; providing guidance and support to young people in custody; or who are care-experienced and providing more general mentoring support.

Interviews with both young people and adults were semi-structured, using the themes emerging from the literature review. Young people had the choice of being interviewed alone, or together with their significant adult. In some cases, young people requested to be interviewed as a group and the researchers were keen to be led by what was the most comfortable setting for them. Two focus groups with three young people in each were therefore conducted and additionally, one focus group was organised with a group of adult mentors.

In the course of the research, children and young people were asked to share their experiences and reflect on the role of adults in their lives. They were prompted to think about which adults were important in their lives and why; what adults do that is helpful to children and young people, including when they get into trouble and how they thought adults should treat children and young people. The researchers asked about the nature of young people's relationships with adults who come into their lives through the programmes provided by statutory and voluntary organisations. Children and young people were also asked how they got involved in working with the different support projects and whether such involvement was helpful. The research also explored their views on what services and support they consider most appropriate and valuable for their circumstances.

Adult respondents were asked how they perceive their role and influence in the lives of young people in supporting the young person in areas such as personal and emotional development, education or training and desistance.

The researchers explored with adults their views of what services and support was considered most appropriate for children and young people 'at risk' and/or with experience of the criminal justice system. Interviews with adults also focused on their role in working with children and young people; the difficulties which children and young people face; the methods of working in the various projects; the type of support provided and the nature of the relationships.

Some children and young people identified their 'significant adults' to be members of their immediate and/or extended family. Due to the restricted time-scale for the research it was not possible to access the majority of these individuals. The researchers were, however, able to interview one adult who was not connected to any specific project and who supported a young person over many years in the community.

Ethical considerations
The researchers were aware that children and young people taking part in this study were likely to have past or recent experiences of abuse, and to have experienced chaotic lifestyles linked to their social circumstances and misuse of alcohol and/or drugs. The researchers checked throughout the interviews that respondents were well and wished to continue. They also took every care to ensure that the participants were in no way harmed through their involvement in the research and that they were, where possible, empowered by the experience.

Informed consent
The researchers, in consultation with NICCY, prepared information leaflets in plain English. These leaflets explained in clear, jargon-free language, the purpose of the research and what it involved for the children/young people and significant adults if they agreed to take part. Guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity were provided (see below), and it was stressed that the participants could withdraw from the research at any time or refuse to answer questions that could cause them discomfort. The participants were also given assurances that withholding consent at any point in the research would have no bearing upon the services they receive.

Informed consent was sought separately from children and their adult guardian if under 16 years of age. Although children of 16 and over were able to give consent, the researchers sought additional consent from their adult guardian if they were available.

Confidentiality and anonymity

All respondents who participated in the research were given assurances that the information they provided would not be passed on to a third party and that they would not be identified by name or otherwise in any publications arising from the research. To this end, generic terms are used if respondents are identifiable in any way, and steps were taken as far as practicable that none of the participants who were involved in the project are identifiable from any descriptions of them or their circumstances.

An exception to the general provision regarding confidentiality pertains in the event of participants disclosing information that indicates they are at risk of being harmed or of harming themselves or others or in the disclosure of criminal activity. Participants were advised at the start of interviews that in the event of such disclosure, it would be necessary for the researcher to pass the information on to a relevant member of staff in the agency or an appropriate adult. No such disclosures were made in the course of this research.

Subject to receipt of the appropriate consent at the outset, interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Recordings and transcripts (and any other data gathered in the course of the research) were stored securely (with data on computer being password protected) with only the project researchers having access to them. Recordings were destroyed following submission and acceptance of the final report.

The research was approved by Queen's University Belfast Ethics Committee and all researchers provided current Access NI Enhanced Disclosure Certificates.

Structure of the report

Chapter 1 provides details of the context of children's lives in Northern Ireland and discusses recent policy initiatives relevant to the treatment of children and young people in the criminal justice system. Chapter 2 presents the key findings of research conducted in the UK and elsewhere into the role of 'significant adults' in the lives of children and young people, and the role and effectiveness of structured interventions such as the provision of mentoring support in a variety of contexts. As the findings of this study indicate the important role that adults can play in facilitating children's and young people's access to their rights, Chapter 3 outlines a range of children's rights relevant to the situation of children and young people in general and those specific to their treatment by the criminal justice system.

Chapter 4 presents the findings from the primary research undertaken for this study with children and young people and their 'significant adults'. These are analysed in the context of relevant literature and children's rights standards in the concluding chapter (Chapter 5).

CHAPTER 1: Children and Young People's Experiences and the Policy Context in Northern Ireland

Introduction

The brief review of research on the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland within this chapter aims to contextualise the findings of the current study, discussing in particular the many challenges that children and young people and their families face in their daily lives. Much of the information in the chapter refers to children and young people in general, and not necessarily those who come into contact with the criminal justice system. The data from research, including this study, indicates however that children who come into the justice system, are disproportionately affected by issues such as poverty, interrupted education, lack of training and employment opportunities, drug and alcohol use and violence in the family and in their communities. Many are also care-experienced. The second part of this chapter focuses on recent reviews of the youth justice system and the prison system in Northern Ireland, as they provide important recommendations on the treatment of children and young people.

The lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland

The legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict

Children and young people were, and remain, a group heavily impacted upon by the conflict in Northern Ireland. Research suggests that over half of all conflict-related deaths were of young people under 29 years old, with boys and young men living in areas experiencing both violence and social deprivation, being most at risk of death and injury (Smyth, 1998, para 3.2). Smyth (1998) found that while many children had 'little experience of the Troubles', a significant minority had 'very intense and concentrated and prolonged' experiences of 'life-threatening' events (ibid, para 3.2.3). Most children currently living in Northern Ireland were born shortly before or after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 1998, but the legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict continues to define the experiences of everyday life for many (McAlister et al, 2010b; Convery et al, 2008). Despite the political focus on 'peace' and 'transition' since the 1998 Agreement, violence continues to feature heavily in the lives of many children and young people. The continuing segregation of communities and pervasive, intergenerational sectarianism, as well as traumatic events experienced by young people's families and communities in the past, evidently impact on the way in which children and

young people define their identity and make use of public space (McAlister et al, 2010a). Young people continue to experience or witness 'sectarian fights and confrontations, rioting with the police and paramilitary-style threats, beatings and shootings' (ibid, p106). This impacts on their sense of safety, opportunities for play and leisure, levels of victimisation and their physical and mental health (ibid).

Despite reforms in policing and criminal justice, the relationship between many young people and the police remains 'tense', with young people feeling discriminated against and negatively stereotyped by the police (McBride, 2011, p57). The transition from conflict has contributed to a loss of identity among young working class men, especially within a context of high unemployment. Their previous apparent role as 'protectors' and 'defenders' of communities has been eroded and 'once lauded and feted' behaviour, such as rioting and aggression, has 'now become a focus for criticism, violent assault and/or expulsion' from those same communities (Harland, 2008, p3). Within this scenario, it is not surprising that a 'disproportionate' number of young men are 'simultaneously involved both as perpetrators and victims of violent crimes' (McCready et al, 2006). Significant also to this study, is the continued separation of children from parents and other familial adults, through the imprisonment of a parent or other family member. Levels of imprisonment during the conflict were high, especially of prisoners with paramilitary affiliations, with many serving lengthy sentences. Currently, it is estimated that around 1,500 children are separated from a parent through imprisonment at any time in Northern Ireland and an estimated 36,000 visits are made by children each year to Northern Ireland's prisons, with a profound and mostly negative impact on these children and their families (Gampell and Scharff-Smith (eds.), 2011, p129). This research also found that services aimed at improving contact between children and their imprisoned parents were generally under-resourced by the Prison Service and there was a particular lack of support for teenagers to facilitate relationships with imprisoned parents.

Poverty and social exclusion and the impact on education and health
One of the enduring legacies of the conflict has been the high level of poverty and social deprivation, heavily concentrated in about 4% of electoral wards (McAlister et al, 2010a, p27).

In the years 2001-2004, 22% of children in Northern Ireland lived in persistent poverty, 13% of those enduring both persistent and severe poverty (Monteith et al, 2008, p2).[1] This compared with 9% of children in Great Britain (5% of whom live in persistent and severe poverty) (ibid). In many cases, children live in households where poverty is a multi-generational issue and the impact of poverty '[is] far reaching – affecting the physical and emotional health of both parents and children as well as children's educational experiences, aspirations and future life chances' (McAlister et al, 2010a, p50). Living in poverty is closely linked to social exclusion and experiences of violence in the community and in the family (Horgan and Monteith, 2009, p1) and negative educational experience (UK Poverty, 2011).

Despite improvements in educational outcomes for children and young people in Northern Ireland, educational attainment remains strongly linked to social background and too many young people leave school with no, or minimal, qualifications. Thirty per cent of 11 year olds in schools with the highest proportion of children entitled to free school meals (a measure of economic deprivation) do not reach level 4 at Key Stage 2[2] and 17% still leave post-primary education with fewer than five GCSEs (ibid). Children and young people in marginalised communities report 'self-excluding' from school, which they consider 'irrelevant' to their future aspirations. This is often embedded in their family and community history of employment in low-paid, manual jobs (McAlister et al, 2010a, pp58-59). However, the economic downturn means that even those jobs are currently less likely to be available. With 20% of young people now unemployed (BBC News On-line, 17 January 2012), 16-24 year olds with no qualifications are experiencing significantly higher unemployment rates (Horgan et al, 2010).

Poverty and social disadvantage impact negatively on health outcomes for children and young people (Kilkelly et al, 2004, p99) and families who live in poverty have been shown to have 'unequal access to health care and poorer health outcomes' (McAlister et al, 2010a, p27).

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[1] Children living in *severe poverty* are defined as those living in households with income below 40% of the UK median net household income. Those living in *persistent and severe poverty* are defined as those who have lived in poverty for at least three years and at least one year in severe poverty (Monteith et al, 2008, p2).
[2] Key Stage 2 tests are taken by all children in their last year of primary school when they are aged between 10 and 11 years. Level 4 is the target level for this age group.

Young people in Northern Ireland experience higher levels of mental ill-health than in England and Scotland and this has been linked in part to the experiences and legacy of the conflict (Harland, 2008). The relatively high rate of suicide and self-harm among young men is of particular concern and of specific relevance to this study is the fact that suicidal young men are 'eight times more likely than their non-suicidal counterparts to be living alone, in care or hostels or without a family structure, and significantly more likely to have a father who is absent' (ibid, p5).

Children's organisations in Northern Ireland have made a strong case for the provision of early intervention and preventative approaches which are acknowledged as bringing long term benefits that 'can ultimately reduce the cost of introducing more expensive specialist support services at a later stage' (Early Years Strategic Alliance, 2011, p6). However, McAllister et al (2010a, p25) noted a lack of access for less well off families to age-appropriate childcare and family support services, in a situation of under-investment by the State in preventative and supportive interventions. While access to support in the community may be difficult:

> Ironically, once a child has offended, or exhibited particular behaviours deemed to indicate risk of offending […] their access to services and support increases significantly (NICCY, 2009, p360).

Stereotyping
Social and economic opportunities for young people can also be limited by stereotypes and negative images that pervade public opinion. Commenting on the UK's periodic report in 2008, the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child stated that it was concerned:

> […] at the general climate of intolerance and negative public attitudes towards children, especially adolescents, which appears to exist in the State party, including in the media, and may be often the underlying cause of further infringements of their rights (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2008).

An analysis of the views of young people on this issue revealed that an overwhelming 85% of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland believe they are being judged negatively because of their age, while 87% stated that they had been treated in a discriminatory way for the same reason (NICCY, 2011, p2).

While 57% of those young people who felt they were discriminated against stated that it was a rare occurrence, a quarter of respondents said that it was a regular experience in their lives (ibid, p3). Experiences of discrimination were more prevalent amongst those young people who stated that they were 'not well off' (ibid). The age of children and young people was also perceived as a decisive factor in the way in which they were allowed to use public space. Survey respondents experienced exclusion from shops or had been treated suspiciously by staff in shops and shopping centres and/or asked to 'move on' from certain areas by residents, police, community representatives or paramilitary representatives (ibid, pp3-4). Young people reported feeling disrespected and judged, as well as being upset and angry because they were treated in certain situations as 'suspicious' (ibid; see also McAlister et al, 2010a, p42).

Exclusion from decision-making
Children and young people in Northern Ireland repeatedly report being excluded from decision-making in all aspects of their lives (Kilkelly et al, 2004; Convery et al, 2008). This includes not being heard in the criminal justice system where children and young people reported having a limited understanding of the criminal justice process (Convery et al, 2008, p253) and having virtually no impact on their situation while subject to criminal sanctions (Kilkelly et al, 2004, p37; NICCY, 2009).

The Youth Justice System in Northern Ireland
The Youth Justice system in Northern Ireland underwent significant change following the report of the Criminal Justice Review in 2000 (NIO, 2000). Under Section 53(1) of the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002, the principal aim of the youth justice system is to protect the public by preventing offending and re-offending by children. The minimum age of criminal responsibility (MACR) remains at 10 years of age, despite continuous national and international criticism and calls for the MACR to be raised to at least 12 (see for example, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2008; Department of Justice, 2011a).

In 2009, children and young people were reported to have committed nearly 10,000 offences (Department of Justice, 2011a, p22). The largest number of recorded offences was in the categories of common assault (1,612), criminal damage (1,431), theft (1,708) and motoring offences (1,023).

While little detail is recorded as to the actual nature of the offences, it has been acknowledged that:

> On the whole, offending by young people tends to be less serious than by adults. The value of stolen goods tends to be smaller, the assaults less serious, and the young people are less likely to be involved in offences such as fraud or drug trafficking (ibid, p22).

The development of 'rich and varied' restorative justice measures in a range of settings and involving statutory and non-statutory organisations, is praised by the Youth Justice Review (ibid, p59) as 'one of the most positive developments' in Northern Ireland's recent history. Within the statutory system, the Justice (NI) Act (2002) introduced a range of measures for children who offend including pre-court diversionary and court-ordered youth conferencing, which are underpinned by restorative justice principles. The Youth Justice Review (ibid) listed the benefits of youth conferencing. These included young people being encouraged to make connections between their behaviour and the subsequent conference plan; young people's active participation within the conference process; professionals working within this setting being well-qualified for their role; and the involvement of the community which encourages reintegration into society.

In cases where children and young people are not diverted away from the criminal justice system by the police (Youth Diversion Scheme introduced in 2003), or the Public Prosecution Service, the courts can use a number of statutory orders, as well as fines, as criminal justice sanctions. Additionally, since 2008, the Early Intervention for the Prevention of Offending Programme (EIP), funded by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), has brought together statutory and non-governmental organisations in partnership to deliver early intervention programmes which work with children deemed 'at risk' of offending.

Detention of children and young people in Northern Ireland
There are two custodial facilities for the detention of children and young people in Northern Ireland: Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre (JJC) and Hydebank Wood Young Offender Centre (YOC). Woodlands JJC is a Youth Justice Agency establishment and may be used for the accommodation of up to 48 boys and girls aged between 10 and 17 who are remanded or sentenced to custody (although children under 14 are only rarely detained there).

While the treatment of children in Woodlands JJC has earned much praise (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI), 2011a), it has also been acknowledged that systemic issues such as the high level of overnight or weekend placements under the Police and Criminal Evidence (NI) Order (PACE placements) and the high number of children held on remand, impact negatively on the effectiveness of provision (CJINI, 2011a, pvi and p10). While the number of children held in the JJC on sentence is systematically falling, the number of those held on remand and under PACE has increased significantly. Remand placements went from 198 in 2008/2009 to 255 in 2010/2011 and the number of children held under PACE increased from 120 to 256 in the same period (CJINI, 2011a, p4). The most recent available annual statistics, while showing a slight decrease in 2011/2012 in the number of children held under PACE, still stand at 234 (or 43% of total admissions) (Youth Justice Agency, 2012). Most children remanded or placed in the JJC under PACE do not go on to receive a custodial sentence. In fact, custodial sentences are only ordered in 7% of these cases (Department of Justice, 2011a, p54). A report by the CJINI noted:

> When unsure about how to deal with them, they were placed in custody as much for their own safety as in response to their offending behaviour [...] Such placements breach international safeguards, and inappropriate use of custody for children remains a more pronounced problem in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK (CJINI, 2008a, pvii).

It is the view of the staff of the JJC that many children who come into their care are 'neither persistent nor serious offenders' (CJINI, 2011a, p5). Instead, children and young people admitted to the JJC are faced with multiple problems, including high levels of drug and alcohol abuse and mental health difficulties. As the 2011 inspection report noted:

> Many of the children who entered the JJC were in poor physical and mental health as they had limited access to, and uptake of healthcare services in their own community. The healthcare interventions and health promotion provided within the JJC were vital for these children (ibid, p39).

The analysis of a 'snapshot' of children held in the centre on 30 November 2007 found that of 30 children, 20 had a diagnosed mental health disorder and 17 a history of self-harm, with 8 having previously tried to take their own life. Looked After Children (LAC) accounted for 37% of initial admissions to the JJC in 2010/2011 (ibid, p5).

The most recent available data provided by CJINI shows that 82% of children detained at JJC in November 2011 came from single-parent families, while 34% had experienced domestic violence; 38% of the sample had a statement of educational needs, with 14% having a recognised learning disability (CJINI, 2012, pv). The analysis showed that 80% of those children experienced exclusion from school or absconded from school and that an overwhelming majority (92%) had misused drugs or alcohol (ibid). The CJINI report also stressed that many of the children held in custody in Northern Ireland have been heavily impacted by different traumatic experiences. These included family members or friends taking their own lives, a history of sexual, physical and emotional abuse, parental substance misuse and/or mental health difficulties, bullying and paramilitary threats (ibid, p11). Such statistics raise significant concerns about how children's and young people's needs are addressed (or not), before they come into contact with the criminal justice system; the capacity of the criminal justice system to provide appropriate support while they are in custody and also how such unaddressed difficulties contribute to children getting into conflict with the law in the first place.

Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre (YOC) is run by the Northern Ireland Prison Service and accommodates over 200 remanded and sentenced boys and young men aged between 17 and 21 years (on conviction). Legislation also allows for boys of 15 and 16 years to be remanded to the YOC. Young men leave the YOC for the adult system on reaching their 24th birthday. Hydebank Wood [Women's] Prison is on the same site as the YOC and is used for the imprisonment of all adult women prisoners. The YOC has been subject to continuous criticism (see for example, CJINI, 2008b; Independent Monitoring Board, 2008; Prison Review Team, 2011). The treatment of children in Prison Service custody has been highlighted as an area of concern, in particular the CJINI observed after its most recent inspection that:

> […] the distinct needs of this age group were far from adequately met and it remained a fundamentally unsuitable place to hold children under the age of 18. It did not have the focus necessary to deal with the most troubled and troublesome children. Excellent new safeguarding children procedures had been introduced but were not effectively implemented. Discipline processes were not age-appropriate and the quality of education and training was far short of what was required. […]

The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) was focused on managing an adult population with a custodial rather than parental model, and it has faced significant criticisms of its provision for children (CJINI, 2011b, pv).

Both the Youth Justice Review team and the Prison Review team recommended the transfer of all children to the Juvenile Justice Centre in 2011 and Minister for Justice, David Ford, announced on the 28th June 2012 that detention of under-18s will cease in all but the most exceptional circumstances from 1st November 2012 (Department of Justice, 2012b). However, issues regarding the treatment of children in the YOC form only part of much broader concerns about the general treatment of young adult men in the facility. The most recent inspection noted serious concerns in areas such as safety and security (including insufficient support for prisoners who self-harmed); severe punishments for disciplinary offences; poor assessment of health needs and poor healthcare delivery; lack of opportunities to spend time in fresh air and poor levels of meaningful activity; and poor quality of educational provision (CJINI, 2011b). These have been echoed in two recent reviews of the youth justice system and the situation in all prisons in Northern Ireland (Department of Justice, 2011a; Prison Review Team, 2011).

The Review of the Youth Justice System in Northern Ireland
Following the Hillsborough Castle Agreement (2010) the Minister for Justice announced a review of the youth justice system in Northern Ireland in November 2010 (Department of Justice, 2010). The Terms of Reference for the review included an assessment of the 'current arrangements for responding to youth crime' and making 'recommendations for how these might be improved within the wider context of […] international obligations, best practice and a financially uncertain future' (Department of Justice, 2011a, p9). The Review Team made a number of recommendations in the areas of: early intervention and prevention; policing of children and young people; diversion and prosecution; bail and remand; youth conferencing and youth court; dealing with delay in criminal proceedings; the use of custody; reintegration and rehabilitation and strategic and practical arrangements for the delivery of services for children and young people. A consultation on the report of the Youth Justice Review was launched by the Department of Justice in September 2011 (Department of Justice, 2011b). Following the consultation, a summary of responses was published at the end of May 2012 (Department of Justice, 2012a), with publication of the implementation plan expected in the autumn of 2012 (Department of Justice, 2012b).

Many recommendations of the Review are directly relevant to this study, as appropriate contact with supportive adults at different stages in the youth justice process could potentially make a considerable difference to children and young people's experience. Of particular relevance to this research, however, are recommendations relating to prevention, early intervention, reintegration and resettlement. These are briefly discussed below.

Prevention and early intervention and the reintegration of children and young people who are in conflict with the law
The Youth Justice Review report stressed that there is a need in Northern Ireland to focus more clearly on early intervention and prevention strategies, strengthening families and communities (Department of Justice, 2011a, p10 and pp30-37) and this view was most recently supported by the Criminal Justice Inspection NI in their report on early interventions in the context of the criminal justice system (CJINI, 2012). The Youth Justice Review Team stressed that measures and initiatives which attempt to prevent offending by children and young people in isolation from addressing children's and families' and communities' social and economic needs, have poor results. Services 'need to target areas of deprivation, successfully engage those most at risk, strengthen family and community capacity and be sufficiently joined up to impact holistically on a wide range of inter-connected risk factors' (Department of Justice, 2011a, p32).

The Review noted that the current lack of a joined-up approach and a pre-occupation with offending behaviour means that too many children and young people are brought into the remit of the criminal justice system (Department of Justice, 2011a, p32). The Review stressed that responsibility for a prevention and early intervention strategy should be located within Government Departments providing universal services such as health and education rather than with the Department of Justice. Respondents to the Department of Justice consultation on the report commented that the recommendations of the Review insufficiently defined 'prevention and early intervention' and that the emphasis on 'targeting' 'at risk' children and young people should not be to the detriment of the provision of universal supportive services (Department of Justice, 2012a).

The Review noted that the contact which children and young people have with the criminal justice system often outweighs the value of the different sanctions as a deterrent and can lead to the severance of links with supportive services (Department of Justice, 2011a, p79).

Of particular concern, was the impact of custodial sanctions and the fact that many young people were leaving custody without stable accommodation to go to and no support with drug and alcohol addictions (ibid). The Review therefore stated that when 'the child is in custody, key relationships must be established with those who will be supporting them afterwards in the community' (ibid, p80) to facilitate their reintegration.

The Prison Review Team report
Also arising out of the Hillsborough Agreement was an independent review of the prison system in Northern Ireland, led by Dame Anne Owers, former Chief Inspector of Prisons (England and Wales). The Prison Review Team found that the prison system in Northern Ireland continued to be dominated by concerns about security and control, rather than focused on meeting prisoners' needs. The Report recommended the removal of children from Hydebank Wood YOC to Woodlands JJC which will accommodate all children (i.e. aged under 18 years) remanded or sentenced to custody. (This is now expected to happen in November 2012). Highly critical of conditions and the regime in the YOC, the Review Team described young prisoners there as 'in many ways a forgotten group' (Prison Review Team, 2011, p70). Recognising the importance of adult support, the Report recommended that each young prisoner be provided with a 'key worker' who would help them to 'negotiate adult services', 'signpost them to provision' and 'be there at times of maximum need and temptation' (ibid, p71). The work of voluntary organisations in the prison, and the role of mentors, was acknowledged in the Report which also recommended that the YOC be transformed into a 'secure college', focused on young people's education, training and employment needs (ibid, p72).

Conclusions
This chapter briefly described the circumstances of the lives of children in Northern Ireland. While poverty and social exclusion, rejection by adults, poor health, poor educational outcomes and discrimination on the grounds of age still affect many children and young people, it is acknowledged that those who come into contact with the criminal justice system are disproportionately affected by such difficulties. As recent reviews of the youth justice system and the prison system in Northern Ireland have shown, those difficulties continue, and can be particularly exacerbated by experience of custody.

Children and young people who are at risk of coming into contact with the criminal justice system or who have had such contact, are likely to be assisted by a variety of adults who are involved in the justice process or play a supportive or supervisory role. These include, but are not limited to, social workers, youth workers, community workers, community educators, teachers, volunteer mentors, probation officers, and custody staff. Research has highlighted the positive impact that supportive relationships with adults can have on improving the life experience of children and young people. The next chapter, therefore, discusses in more detail the nature and potential impact of those relationships.

CHAPTER 2: The Role of 'Significant Adults' in the Lives of Children and Young People

Introduction

There are a number of ways in which non-parental adults can play an important developmental role in the lives of children and young people in different contexts. Relationships with adults can form part of a supportive environment in which children's and young people's ability to deal with adverse life events, peer pressure, school problems, relationship issues and health and other difficulties develop over time. 'Non-kin' adults can provide emotional and practical support in addition to that of family. This chapter outlines the findings of research into the nature and impact of children's and young people's relationships with significant adults and discusses how such research assisted in the development of more 'structured' support, for example, mentoring. This is a general review of the relevant literature and references do not necessarily always refer to children and young people in conflict with the law.

Defining 'significant adults'

Researchers examining important relationships between adolescents and adults refer, interchangeably, to: 'significant adults'; 'non-parental significant others'; 'significant influencers' or 'Very Important non-Parental adults (VIPs)'. Some also refer to such adults as 'mentors' in both professional and non-professional contexts.

Very Important non-Parental adults are defined in the literature as those who have had a significant influence on a child or young person and on whom they can rely for support (Chen et al, 2003). Such adults can come from a number of backgrounds and include family members, teachers, employers, church representatives, sports coaches or older friends (ibid). Rhodes et al (1992) refer to these adults as 'natural mentors' while Munson and McMillen (2009) define them as 'unrelated adults […] that are willing to listen, share experiences and guide the youth through their lives' (p105). Hurd and Zimmerman (2010) include in this category an adult who is 25 years of age or older, to whom the young person can turn for support and guidance, or assistance in making important decisions and from whom the young person draws an inspiration to 'do their best' (p40). Bush and Dong (2003) define VIPs as 'someone at least 21 years old who has had significant influence on [the young person] or whom [the young person] can count on in times of need' (p39).

Some researchers base their studies on a simplified definition which does not prescribe the age of the person or particular nature of the influence and simply define 'mentors' or 'VIPs' as adults whom young people identify as being important figures in their lives (Haddad et al, 2011).

Who are 'significant adults'?

In their study of the influence of 'natural mentors' on the lives of young adolescents, Zimmerman et al (2002) found that over 50% of respondents identified such a person in their lives. Most often, young people identified an extended family member, such as an uncle or grandparent, as their mentor (35.7%). This was followed by professionals such as teachers or coaches (10%) 'whose mentoring relationship with the respondent may have evolved out of their professional duties' (ibid, p11). In a study of the role of natural mentors in the lives of young people transitioning into adulthood, Hurd and Zimmerman (2010) noted that well over 60% of their respondents from the African-American community reported having a natural mentor, with just over half of those mentors being members of an extended family network (p41). Mentors from outside the family identified as having an important influence on a young person's life, included god-parents, parents' boyfriends or girlfriends and friends' parents (ibid).

Such research, largely undertaken in the US, follows the pattern of studies from other countries which found that while parents were the most often mentioned significant adults in the lives of children and young people, extended family members played an important role in 'natural mentoring' (Galbo and Demetrulias, 1996). The most often identified important non-parental adults outside of the family circle were teachers and coaches, parents' friends, a parent of a friend, and people with a religious affiliation (ibid). In research undertaken by Beam et al (2002), respondents mentioned having kin and non-kin significant adults with almost equal frequency (52% compared with 48%), with aunts and uncles (22%) and siblings (14%) most frequently represented in the kin category. Differences have been observed in relationships formed by children and young people who are care-experienced. They reported forming important relationships with members of their extended family, but also with adults with whom they came into contact in the care system, for example case workers (Ahrens et al, 2011; Collins et al, 2010).

Differences have been observed regarding the identification of different non-parental adults according to the gender of the respondent.

In their retrospective research on recollections of the role of significant adults undertaken with university students, Galbo and Demetrulias (1996) found that female students were more likely to identify grandparents as significant in their lives (55% of female respondents compared to 42% of male respondents), while male students reported that they preferred adults with whom they were involved in activities and those from outside of the home environment (ibid).

The research by Beam et al (2002) on the nature of the relationship between young people and significant adults, found differences as to when such relationships develop, depending on whether they are with kin or non-kin adults. While the onset of relationships with kin significant adults was distributed throughout the life of the young person (up until the age of 17 when the young people were interviewed for the research), relationships with non-kin significant adults tended to develop from the age of 13 (p320).

The nature of relationships between children and young people and significant adults

Beam et al (2002) tested whether relationships between adolescents and their VIPs are of a *normative* (i.e. occurring naturally and as part of the child's development), or *compensatory* nature (i.e. they are triggered by a certain, often traumatic, event in the child's life). The role of mentors or 'VIPs' is often conceptualised as focusing on their compensatory role, i.e. they are viewed as individuals who 'provide the at-risk adolescents with support or resources that are not adequately provided by parents' (ibid, p307). The authors found that only a minority of respondents (23%) indicated that their relationship with the significant adult started at a time of difficulty in their lives. In those cases, the most frequently occurring events that triggered the relationship were family difficulties, followed by personal problems, changes or transition in the child's life and peer or school-related difficulties (ibid, p315). The authors observed that many of the relationships with significant adults developed naturally through contact between children and young people and adults in different circumstances and that often, the quality of their relationship and its impact was independent of the quality of adolescents' relationships with their parents or peers, indicating their *normative* nature.

This research reported that VIPs were important to young people as they showed them respect, provided emotional support, additional to that of their family or friends, and supported various activities in which young people participated (p316).

Young people saw their VIPs as 'someone to talk to' and as someone who provided support with issues at school, relationships and financial questions. They also acted as role models for the young people (ibid). The relationship between the young person and their significant adult was characterised by low levels of conflict (rare arguments or misunderstandings) and VIPs interviewed for the research reported that such relationships were also very important to them and that they would be 'quite sad or upset if the relationship were to end' (ibid, p316). VIPs who were family members tended to value the relationship with the young person more and quite naturally, the duration of their relationship with young people was usually much longer, however, non-kin significant adults reported a higher frequency of contact with the young people (ibid, pp320-321).

The nature of the relationship with a significant adult may differ depending on the background of the child or the young person involved. In their research into the role of significant adults in the lives of children who are care-experienced, Ahrens et al (2011) reported that this group often faces significant initial barriers in forming trusting relationships with adults. Young people who were interviewed for the research cited their fear of being hurt emotionally or being let down by an adult as the reason for their reluctance to form close relationships (ibid, p1017). Young people also reported that on occasion, they felt they were being pushed to bond with an adult and that they were not meeting the adult's expectations of forming a close relationship quickly (ibid, p1018). It has been suggested that 'naturally occurring' mentoring can provide a better fit for young people transitioning from care, as such relationships 'form gradually and are therefore likely to be less pressured' (Greeson et al, 2010, p566).

Young people stated that it was easier for them to form relationships with adults who were patient and persistent in their attempts to develop a meaningful relationship, and who displayed genuine affection, an understanding of the young person's life and respect for their experiences (ibid). Young people who came in contact with their mentors through a variety of support programmes also reported that their relationships were of a better quality, if the mentors accepted them on their own terms; when mentors and mentees shared at least some life experiences; had a similar sense of humour and when mentors had some knowledge of the local community (Philip et al, 2004).

The impact of relationships with significant adults on children and young people

As noted by Hirsh et al (2002), '[s]ignificant nonparental adults can […] serve as crucial educators and support figures, promoting learning, competence and adjustment of youth facing an array of developmental challenges' (p290). Scales and Gibbons (1996) further suggest that the presence of a relationship with at least one caring adult can act as the single most important protective factor in the lives of children who are considered 'at risk'.

The impact of a relationship with a significant adult who is not the parent can positively influence the emotional, as well as physical development of a child or young person. Greenberger et al (1998) found, for example, that children and young people who stated that they had a significant adult (or a VIP) in their lives, were less likely to engage in misconduct; their behaviour was not influenced as much by the behaviour of close friends or family members and the opinions of the significant adult had more influence over the child's behaviour than those of parents or peers. It has been argued that relationships with non-parental adults who are not members of the extended family can have the greatest impact on a child's behaviour (Rishel et al, 2005), thereby indicating the potentially positive influence of relationships with 'professionals' who come into contact with children throughout their lives. Focusing on health outcomes for young people transitioning into adulthood, Hurd and Zimmerman (2010) found that the presence of a 'natural mentor' in a young person's life was closely associated with young people displaying fewer depressive symptoms over time and less engagement in risky sexual behaviours.

Care-experienced children and young people reported that significant adults in their lives could contribute to the development of skills important to forming healthy relationships (Ahren et al, 2011). They played a role in teaching young people about constructive conflict resolution and setting boundaries with peers as well as achieving practical goals such as arranging accommodation (ibid, p1019). Such impacts resulted from consistent emotional support but also from providing young people with opportunities, such as participating in activities in which they would not otherwise be able to take part (for example, camping) (ibid, p1020). Care-experienced young people reported meeting significant adults through the care system (including foster parents), indicating the importance of such relationships to them and their development (ibid).

The presence of a mentor in a young person's life at the time of transition into independent living (i.e. at 18-19 years of age), was linked to lower stress levels, greater life satisfaction and lower probability of them coming into contact with the criminal justice system. This was particularly true for those who had known their mentor for over a year before the transition (Munson and McMillen 2009, p109).

Beam et al (2002) concluded that relationships between young people and significant adults 'tend to provide a combination of positive adult qualities (e.g. providing advice, serving as a role model) and 'peer like' relations (e.g. non-judgemental, non-punitive, fun)' (p322). This, in the authors' view, provides young people with an 'experientially rich and interpersonally supportive environment for development' (ibid).

The use of mentoring in working with young people
One of the ways in which children and young people develop supportive relationships with adults is through participation in mentoring programmes. Such programmes are of a particular interest to this study, as a number of interviewees (adults and children and young people) developed such relationships in the context of mentoring support provided by various organisations supporting young people in conflict with the law in Northern Ireland. The following section therefore includes a brief overview of the literature on mentoring and the impact it can have on children's and young people's lives.

The interest in and development of mentoring programmes for young people, especially those considered to be 'at risk', was in large part influenced by research which highlighted the positive impact of relationships with significant non-parental adults on young people's development (DuBois et al, 2002), reviewed in the previous section. Indeed, in much of the literature on the role of significant adults, the relationship between them and young people is referred to as 'mentoring' defined as a 'social connection between a more experienced (and typically older) mentor and a less experienced mentee' (Hurd and Zimmerman, 2010, p37). Research emanating from the US, in particular, indicates that the majority of mentoring relationships are based on pre-existing social networks and are informal in nature (Hurd and Zimmerman, 2010). However, acknowledging that transitions into adulthood have become more complex in the last two to three decades, some authors have suggested that 'engineered' supportive relationships have the potential to assist young people as much as those which occur naturally as part of the child's or young person's development (Philip and

Spratt, 2007). With evidence emerging from a variety of research that mentoring young people can bring some benefits in relation to their physical and mental development, the use of this approach with different groups of young people has increased significantly.

'Mentoring' encompasses a variety of programmes which operationally include a number of different working practices, aims and structures (Newburn and Shiner, 2006). Indeed, while far from being a proven intervention (ibid; Philip and Spratt, 2007), mentoring has in recent years become common place in work with young people at risk of offending, those in conflict with the law, young people leaving care, school children, children and young people with disabilities, and other groups. The Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (MBF) defines mentoring as: 'A voluntary, mutually beneficial and purposeful relationship in which an individual gives time to support another to enable them to make change in their lives' (MBF, 2011). In the UK, in recent years government policy has been focused on providing mentoring interventions for young people and their families, especially those defined as socially excluded (Philip et al, 2004).

Despite some scepticism as to the use of mentoring in work with young people (see below), the method is widely used in a variety of contexts, including in education and supporting children and young people in times of transition. In recent years, a number of evaluations have assessed the effectiveness of mentoring young people in a school and community context, indicating initial positive outcomes. While much of the evidential base in relation to mentoring originates in the US, some UK studies have also been undertaken in the last 12 years.

An evaluation of mentoring projects supporting young people leaving care in the UK, found that 93% of participants reported a number of positive outcomes of the mentoring relationship (Clayden and Stein, 2005). Those were consistent with the goals young people set themselves at the start of the project and related mainly to improving their experience of moving from care settings to independent living. They also included improvements in access to education, and gaining independent living skills, or practical and social skills.

Having analysed 55 different evaluations of mentoring interventions, DuBois et al (2002) noted that initial positive outcomes were reported in relation to dealing with problem behaviours and increased or improved participation in education and employment.

Fewer improvements were observed in relation to social, emotional and psychological adjustment and mentoring appeared to have less impact compared with other structured psychological, educational, and behavioural interventions generally, and mental health prevention programmes directed at children and adolescents specifically (DuBois et al, 2002).

In a community context, an evaluation of the 'Big Brothers Big Sisters' mentoring programme in the US (Tierney and Grossman, 2000), found that engagement with mentors resulted in fewer young people initiating drug and alcohol use; young people reporting a decrease in violent behaviours; improved school attendance, and improved relationships with parents and peers.

While evidence exists in the literature which indicates that mentoring relationships with young people improve outcomes in areas such as education, employment, mental health, etc., it has also been suggested that:

> […] mentoring relationships developed in the context of formal programs may function differently from those that are more naturally occurring, and may have varying degrees of benefit across different populations of youth […] (Ahrens et al, 2011, p1013).

The greater impact of relationships with 'natural mentors' has, in particular, been observed in research on children and young people in care (Ahrens et al, 2011). Analysing the available evidence, the authors reported better outcomes of less-formalised relationships with significant adults in areas such as better physical and mental health (including lower levels of stress and depression), improved educational attainment and employability, decreased risk of homelessness or contact with the criminal justice system.

Youth justice
In the context of youth justice, Newburn and Shiner's (2006) evaluation of *Mentoring Plus* (a set of programmes offering mentoring alongside an education/training component designed to improve school attendance and/or employability), reported positive changes in relation to young people's engagement with education, training, employment and in gaining qualifications. However, while a reduction in offending was evident among the programme participants, the evaluators noted 'similar – and in some cases – more marked reductions [among] non-participants' (Newburn and Shiner, 2006, p37), indicating that desistance might have occurred for reasons other than contact with their

mentors. Interestingly, participants of the *Mentoring Plus* project who stated that the programme helped them to challenge their offending behaviour 'did not show particularly marked reductions in actual offending' (ibid, p37). The authors acknowledge, however, that the increased rates of social inclusion associated with the effectiveness of the programme in relation to engagement with education, training and employment may have a positive impact on levels of offending over a longer period of time.

The precise impact of mentoring programmes has been difficult to measure, particularly in relation to the actual impact on re-offending rates (NOMS, 2008). For example, two large-scale studies of mentoring young people in the criminal justice system undertaken for the Youth Justice Board in Great Britain (Tarling et al, 2004 and St James-Roberts et al, 2005) reported no effects or even negative effects upon offending. Tarling et al (2004) reported an overall 55% re-offending rate within one year of joining the project (increasing to nearly 80% for those who had previously been imprisoned). Additionally, the number of evaluations of mentoring interventions is still quite low, making it difficult to provide authoritative statements about the effectiveness of mentoring as an intervention with children and young people.

The challenges of mentoring

The use of mentoring as an intervention is not without its critics. In the UK in particular, mentoring has been criticised for concentrating too much on individual 'deficits' and 'pathology' (Piper and Piper, 2000) and as often ignoring the social contexts of young people's lives (Philip and Spratt, 2007). As Hall (2003) summarises in his review of literature on mentoring:

> It is clear […] that mentoring is not a straightforward concept: in many ways it is ill-defined and it occupies contested territory somewhere between those who would see it as all warm and comforting and those who regard it as an ill-disguised attempt to maintain existing power relations by shifting attention away from social inequalities to the alleged inadequacies of individuals (p5).

In the context of work with disadvantaged young people, Philip and Spratt (2007) recognised that the high profile given by policy makers to mentoring and befriending has had some positive consequences, particularly in publicising the nature of the difficulties and disadvantages faced by young people in society.

Such a high profile also means that a wide range of individuals across all communities could potentially be energised to get involved in positive work with young people (ibid). On the other hand, the authors outlined the negative consequences of the very high expectations of mentoring as an effective intervention and warned that it can be construed as:

> [...] a 'quick fix' for what are agreed to be difficult and sometimes intransigent issues. It also creates highly unrealistic expectations about the power of mentoring to act as a magic bullet to 'transform lives' and to single-handedly redress the impact of inequalities and structural constraints on sections of the youth population (Philip and Spratt, 2007, p37).

Philip and Spratt (2007) also pointed to concerns raised in the research on mentoring in the UK regarding the way in which such interventions were often linked to programme goals (for example, gaining employment), thus introducing a coercive element to the mentoring relationship. Young people's withdrawal from a programme could lead to the termination of the mentoring relationship and thus leave them unsupported at a time when they are most at risk. Furthermore, a focus on the achievement of a specific programme-related goal may result in other needs being disregarded (ibid). Similarly, Colley's (2003) critical analysis focuses on 'engagement mentoring', which she defines as mentoring that is focused on young people at risk of, or already disengaged from education, training and employment, and which aims to improve their employability. Colley argues that 'engagement mentoring' schemes seek to change the attitudes and behaviours of young people, with a view to creating a docile attitude compatible with employment. Colley concludes that positive relationships can be transforming and at their best, may help to ease the 'difficult transition to adulthood', however there is a danger that both mentees and mentors may experience loss of self-confidence, anxiety and stress when relationships are problematic or end. Furthermore, 'the ways in which a life can change' cannot be predicted or controlled in a way increasingly required by policymakers. Young people are not 'passive recipients' and show 'agency and resistance' (p19), however, power relationships in the process are not equal and neither mentor nor mentee are the most 'powerful actors', both being subject to the broader 'structural mechanisms of oppression and exploitation' (p18).

Discussing the implications of their research for the nature of relationships between young people and significant adults, Beam et al (2002) point to the fact that most programmes providing support to children and young people tend to focus on high-risk populations and 'assigned mentors' (p323), with the programmes not always having the capacity to work with every child who needs such support. The authors suggest that practitioners and policymakers should perhaps concentrate more on facilitating and strengthening relationships which occur naturally throughout children's and young people's lives, using those to facilitate better outcomes.

Conclusions

Parents and carers, as well as extended family members play an important role in children's and young people's lives. Such relationships form part of a supportive environment in which children's and young people's ability to deal with adverse life events, peer pressure, school problems, relationship issues and health and other difficulties, develops over time. Where family support is, for whatever reason not available, significant adults can play an important role in the transition to adulthood by supporting the development of skills important to form healthy relationships and to improve young people's life experiences. Research into the nature and impact of relationships with significant adults demonstrates that children and young people value a non-judgmental approach by adults and it is important to them to have someone they can count on in a time of need. Such support can be provided through more structured interventions, such as mentoring, which have been shown to have a positive impact on children's and young people's transition to adulthood.

As can be seen from this review, literature on the role of significant adults focuses mainly on developmental outcomes for children and young people and comes from an area of psychological research. It is evident, however, that the issues raised are often linked to key children's rights. For example, significant adults may be involved in ensuring that children's best interests are taken into account; listening to children and taking their views seriously; showing children respect and treating them with dignity; protecting them from harm; offering food and accommodation; helping children to access their rights to education, training and employment, and to healthcare services and leisure facilities. They may also support children in trying to desist from offending, thus promoting their diversion from the criminal justice system. Where children's rights are breached, the involvement of a significant adult may be vital in supporting the child to deal with the situation.

It is clear that the issue of children's rights is at the core of adult involvement in supporting vulnerable children and young people. What is striking is that the literature on significant adults and mentoring rarely refers to the adult's role explicitly in these terms, focusing rather on changes to the young person's attitude or lifestyle. The current research addresses this gap, by considering adult involvement with young people within the context of access to rights. The following chapter therefore, reviews children's rights standards and international instruments which are most relevant to this study.

CHAPTER 3: Children's Rights Standards Relevant to this Study

Introduction

The research undertaken for this study indicates that adults can play an important role in facilitating children's and young people's access to their rights. This is particularly true in relation to the right to education, to an adequate standard of living, health and protection from violence. Alongside this, the provision of support such as mentoring needs to be structured in a way which respects children's rights, particularly by recognising the principle of the best interests of the child, the right to be heard and to have children's views taken into account when decisions about their lives are taken by adults. It is important that those who are providing support to children and young people in conflict with the law support the implementation of children's rights in their day-to-day practice. The sections below discuss those rights in more detail.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20th November 1989. The UK signed the UNCRC on 19th April 1990 and ratified it on 16th December 1991, with the Convention coming into force in the UK on 15th January 1992. The UNCRC is the most ratified international human rights treaty, with almost all States (except Somalia and the United States), now being party to it. The UNCRC protects a number of civil, political, social and economic rights of children. The provisions of the UNCRC range from protection from discrimination (Article 2) and the right to life and development (Article 6), the protection of the right to preservation of identity (Article 8) and freedom of expression (Article 13) to the right to protection from all forms of violence (Article 19) and the right to an adequate standard of living (Article 27).

The implementation of the UNCRC is monitored by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (hereafter referred to as 'the Committee'), a committee of independent experts. State-parties are obliged to report to the Committee at regular intervals, with the first report submitted two years after accession to the UNCRC, and then every five years thereafter. The Committee examines reports provided by State-parties and issues recommendations. The UK Government provides regular reports to the Committee on the implementation of the UNCRC, with reports including information specific to Northern Ireland. The Committee examined the most recent UK report in 2008 and another is due in 2013.

The principle of the best interests of the child (Article 3, UNCRC)

Article 3 of the UNCRC contains one of the basic principles of the Convention stating that in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration. In line with this principle, State-parties are required to ensure that children are afforded such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being through legislative and administrative measures (Article 3, para 2) as well as ensuring that services and facilities are provided in a way which respects this principle (Article 3, para 3).

Although there is no one legal interpretation of the principle of the best interests of the child, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stresses that:

> The principle requires active measures throughout Government, parliament and the judiciary. Every legislative, administrative and judicial body or institution is required to apply the best interests principle by systematically considering how children's rights and interests are or will be affected by their decisions and actions - by, for example, a proposed or existing law or policy or administrative action or court decision, including those which are not directly concerned with children, but indirectly affect children (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003, p4).

Crucially, the best interests of the child should always be established in consultation with the child directly affected by the actions of the various bodies (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009) i.e. with respect for the right of the child to be heard (Article 12, UNCRC).

The right to be heard (Article 12)

The right to be heard and to have the child's views taken into consideration under Article 12 of the UNCRC constitutes another one of the fundamental principles of the Convention and all other rights must be implemented in a way which respects the provisions of this Article (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). While recognising that significant progress has been made in recent years in relation to the implementation of the right to be heard, specifically through the development of the practice of 'participation', the Committee stresses that many children - including those who are younger or who are marginalised and/or disadvantaged in a society, continue to have limited opportunities to express their views (ibid, p6).

The implementation of the right to be heard will be dependent on the context and will include both the views of an individual child as well as children as a social group (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). The Committee stresses that the provisions of Article 12 impose a duty on the State to 'assess the capacity of the child to form autonomous opinion to the greatest extent possible' (ibid, p9). This includes, for example, employing non-verbal methods of communication with younger children or providing children with disabilities with means by which they can effectively make their views known (ibid).

Under Article 12, children have the right to express their views 'freely'. This means that they should be able to state what they think, without being subjected to undue influence or pressure, in circumstances which take into consideration the child's individual or social situation and in an environment in which the child feels secure and respected (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, p10). To enable the child to express their views freely, it is also important that the child is informed about the context of the decision to be taken regarding their situation, the possible options regarding such decisions, as well as their consequences for the child (ibid).

The UNCRC states that the views of children should be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (Article 12, para 1). This means that simply listening to the child is not sufficient – instead, their views need to be seriously considered by decision makers in different contexts (legislative, administrative, etc) and children should be informed as to how their views influenced the final outcome of the decision-making process (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, pp11-12). The Convention stresses that every child has the right to express their views without discrimination (Article 2, UNCRC).

The right to life and development and the right to identity (Articles 6 and 8)
The UNCRC recognises the importance of the right of every child to life and the right to development (Article 6, UNCRC). The Committee understands 'development' in a very broad sense and expects State-parties to ensure that children are supported in their 'physical, mental, spiritual, moral, psychological and social development' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003, p4). The ways in which this right is being implemented should aim to achieve optimal development for all children (ibid) and the views of the child should be included to stimulate the full development of their personality and individual capacities (Article 12, UNCRC; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, p19).

In this context, the Convention also protects the right of children to have their identity and family connections respected and 'recognized by law without unlawful interference' (Article 8, UNCRC).

The right to education (Articles 28 and 29)
The UNCRC stresses the importance of education in the lives of children and the right to education under the Convention (Articles 28 and 29) goes well beyond access to formal education. The Committee is clear that education is to 'embrace the broad range of life experiences and learning processes which enable children, individually and collectively, to develop their personalities, talents and abilities and to live a full and satisfying life within society' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001, p2). In this context, the aim of education should be to 'empower the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence' (ibid). The UNCRC requires that education be child-centred and have at its core the development of the child's talents and skills as well as their personality and recognize that each child is unique (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001). Of great importance to this study is the focus of the UNCRC on the fact that education in its broadest sense should not only equip the child with basic skills such as numeracy and literacy but also (and perhaps more fundamentally), with 'life skills such as the ability to make well-balanced decisions; to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner; and to develop a healthy lifestyle, good social relationships and responsibility, critical thinking, creative talents, and other abilities which give children the tools needed to pursue their options in life' (ibid).

The right to play and leisure (Article 31)
Article 31 guarantees the right of all children to rest, leisure and play and to take part in cultural activities. Children's right to play 'is sometimes referred to as the "forgotten right", perhaps because it appears to the adult world as a luxury rather than a necessity of life' (UNICEF, 2007, p469), yet the implementation of this right is viewed by the Committee as one of the prerequisites to the balanced development of children. The Committee notes that through play, 'children both enjoy and challenge their current capacities', yet 'realising the right to rest, leisure, and play is often hindered by a shortage of opportunities for young children to meet, play and interact in child-centered, secure, supportive, stimulating and stress-free environments' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). The Committee's view is that State-parties pay insufficient attention to the implementation of the right to play and leisure (ibid) and this includes the UK, where the Committee recommended in 2008 that the Government

strengthen 'its efforts to guarantee the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2008, para 68).

The rights of children in conflict with the law (Articles 37 and 40)
The UNCRC includes a number of provisions protecting children in conflict with the law (in particular, Articles 37 and 40). These provisions contain basic principles regarding the treatment of children by the criminal justice system and include the prohibition of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Article 37(a)), the principle of detention and imprisonment as a measure of last resort (Article 37(b)), the right to be treated with dignity while in detention (Article 37(c)); the right to legal assistance (Article 37(d)); the right to fair trial and freedom from arbitrary detention, as well as effective reintegration (Article 40). In relation to the latter, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recognises that children who are (or were in the past), in conflict with the law often experience discrimination when trying to reintegrate into society (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007). The Committee therefore stresses that State-parties should take measures to ensure that children in conflict with the law are provided with appropriate assistance to help them integrate into, for example, education or the labour market (ibid). Both the UNCRC and the UN Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty 1990 (Havana Rules), provide that any child deprived of their liberty has the right to education suited to their needs and abilities and one that will prepare them for their return to society (Havana Rules, Rule 38). In the context of the right to education as explained above, this includes the development of life skills going beyond the formal curriculum. Children in detention also have the right to contact with the wider community (Havana Rules, Rules 59-62) and such contact, including with family and friends, as well as representatives of various organisations, should be promoted and encouraged by staff in detention facilities.

Prevention in the context of the criminal justice system
In 2007, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted that State-parties to the UNCRC still had a long way to go in relation to the implementation of the Convention in the area of the rights of children in conflict with the law (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007, p1). In particular, the Committee noted that, while in individual countries progress has been made, across many jurisdictions few measures were being implemented to ensure that such children are dealt with, without resorting to judicial proceedings.

The Committee is clear that appropriate prevention measures in the criminal justice system should be implemented in a way which incorporates the protection and implementation of other rights enshrined in the UNCRC, in particular the right to be free from discrimination (Article 2), the right to life and development (Article 6) and the right of the child to have their views heard (Article 12) as well as the overarching principle of the best interests of the child (Article 3) (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007). Where children are in conflict with the law, the UNCRC and the Committee place an important focus on prevention in recognition of the fact that contact with the criminal justice system can have a serious detrimental effect on the child's development (Article 40 and UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007, p7). While acknowledging the role of parents and carers to provide children with appropriate direction and guidance, the UNCRC requires States to implement a variety of preventative measures, ensuring the implementation of the right to an adequate standard of living (Article 27), the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24), education (Articles 28 and 29) and the right to protection from all forms of physical and mental violence, injury or abuse or exploitation (Articles 19, 32 and 34) (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007, p7).

The importance of prevention in relation to children coming into contact with the criminal justice system has been recognised not only within the UNCRC and the UN Committee's General Comments, but also through an agreement on a set of guidelines relating to prevention – the UN Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (The Riyadh Guidelines), 1990.

The Riyadh Guidelines are based on a number of principles, two of which are of fundamental importance: that the whole society plays a role in prevention by ensuring the 'harmonious development' of children and young people 'with respect for and promotion of their personality from early childhood' (Riyadh Guidelines, I.2) and that prevention should be child-centred, recognising that '[Y]oung persons should have an 'active role and partnership within society' and 'should not be considered as mere objects of socialization or control' (Riyadh Guidelines, I.3). Prevention policies should avoid criminalising children or penalising them for behaviours which do not damage their own development or present harm to others (Riyadh Guidelines, I.5) and should utilise community-based approaches, with formal agencies only involved as a measure of last resort (Riyadh Guidelines, I.6).

Supporting the implementation of the Riyadh Guidelines, the Committee commented that 'emphasis should be placed on prevention policies that facilitate the successful socialization and integration of all children, in particular through the family, the community, peer groups, schools, vocational training and the world of work, as well as through voluntary organizations' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007, p7 and Riyadh Guidelines, IV.10). Such policies and programmes should provide support to vulnerable families and provide special care and attention to children and young people who may be at risk of coming into contact with the criminal justice system (ibid). Importantly, these should also respond to the 'special needs, problems, concerns and interests of children' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007, p8). The Committee is clear that support should be provided to parents and carers in the community in a way which does not focus on the prevention of negative outcomes for their children but which supports them in providing appropriate care and direction to their children in a positive way (ibid).

The Riyadh Guidelines (IV B.20-31) also underline the particular significance of education in the development of prevention strategies or approaches, stating that State-parties should ensure that education focuses, among other things, on the teaching of values and promotion of the child's and societal identity; promotion and development of the child's individual identity and their talents and physical and mental abilities to their fullest potential; involvement of children as active participants in their own education; encouragement for understanding and respect for diverse views and opinions and the provision of positive emotional support to children and young people.

The Guidelines (IV C.32-39) place a particular focus on the provision of services for young people in the community. Such services should respond to the special needs, problems, interests and concerns of young people and include recreational facilities and services which support children and young people who may be considered at social risk.

Diversion
Where children are accused of, or are recognised as having infringed criminal laws, their cases should be first and foremost dealt with by means of diversion, either without resorting to judicial proceedings or in the context of judicial proceedings (Article 40(3), UNCRC and UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007). The arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child should only be used as a measure of last resort (Article 37(b), UNCRC).

In this context, State-parties are required to develop a range of measures to ensure that children are dealt with in a way which is appropriate to their well-being, and proportionate to both their circumstances and the offence which they have been alleged or recognised to have committed (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007, p8). The Committee stresses that, given most children who are in conflict with the law commit only minor offences, diversionary measures should ensure that they are removed from criminal justice processes and dealt with through alternative approaches (for example, through social services) (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007). In cases where it is necessary to initiate judicial proceedings, children should be diverted into a range of community-based disposals such as supervision or probation orders (ibid). The reintegration of the child should be a primary consideration in the implementation of any measure in the context of criminal justice proceedings (Article 40(1), UNCRC).

Conclusions

Taken together, the rights contained within the Convention and other instruments cover all aspects of children's lives and guide and regulate their contact with the criminal justice system. The UK is obliged under international law, to protect the rights of children and young people and to seek to ensure their realisation for all children without discrimination. It can prove difficult, however, for children to access their rights, particularly given their relatively powerless position within society, and especially in situations where their vulnerability is compounded by discrimination or disadvantage.

The protection and realisation of the rights of children and young people in contact with the criminal justice system is especially important as this is a context in which there is strong potential for rights to be breached. Clearly there is a need to ensure that children and young people coming into contact with criminal justice agencies have their views heard and taken into account and their best interests assured. Appropriate steps must be taken to ensure children can develop socially and emotionally while they are subject to the justice process. Steps must also be taken to ensure they are effectively reintegrated into the community. The emphasis in the UNCRC and Riyadh Guidelines on prevention and diversion is also of particular relevance to this study.

It is clear from the review of literature on the role of significant adults that these adults can play an important role in supporting young people in accessing their rights, although as discussed above, this tends not to be the focus of evaluations or research studies. This research explored, amongst other issues, the role which significant adults can play in supporting children during their contact with the justice system, and ensuring the implementation of children's rights, facilitating their access to education, health care and health promotion, the right to development and identity, the right to family life and protection from harm. The next chapter outlines the findings of this study and discusses how such facilitation impacts on the situation of children and young people in conflict with the law.

CHAPTER 4: The Role of Significant Adults in the Lives of Children and Young People coming into Contact with the Criminal Justice System In Northern Ireland

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the primary research undertaken with children and young people and their significant adults. In total, 20 children and young people were interviewed; five girls and young women and 15 boys and young men, all aged 14 to 25, apart from one older participant who was 30. Interviewees came from a range of locations in Northern Ireland, including Belfast, Newry and Ballymena. Additional information was provided by Include Youth which consulted boys and young men in Woodlands JJC and Hydebank Wood YOC. Interviews were also conducted with 22 workers and volunteers who were identified as significant adults, in that they played valuable/important support roles in the lives of children and young people in a variety of settings, through education and training and employment programmes and youth justice and custodial settings. Adults interviewed for this study were either identified by the children and young people or were self-selecting. Children and young people, as well as adult workers and volunteers to be interviewed, were identified by the Youth Justice Agency (including Woodlands JJC), NIACRO, Include Youth, the Prince's Trust, NI Alternatives, Opportunity Youth, Barnardo's and VOYPIC who all also facilitated access to interviewees. Some of the young people in the study were involved in the different projects on a voluntary basis, and in other cases the relationships between children and young people and workers and volunteers had developed following referrals to the different projects as part of a criminal justice disposal.

In the course of the research, children and young people were asked to share their experiences and reflect on the role of adults in their lives. They were prompted to think about which adults were important in their lives and why; what adults do that is helpful to children and young people, including when they get into trouble and how they thought adults should treat children and young people. Children and young people were asked about the nature of their relationships with adults who came into their lives through the programmes provided by the statutory or voluntary organisation with which they were engaged.

They were also asked how they became involved with the different projects and whether such involvement was helpful to them in their daily living situation or in achieving their goals.

Interviews with adults focused on the difficulties which children and young people encountered; methods of working within the various projects; the type of support provided and nature of the relationships.

Children and young people
A number of themes emerged during the research. These included the difficulties faced by children and young people in their everyday lives; their family relationships; relationships with their communities and experiences of state care. Interviewees also talked about the support offered by adults and the way in which such support helped in positive transitions in young people's lives. The sections below present the findings in more detail.

The background of young people in conflict with the law
The young people who participated in the study had either been in conflict with the law, or were considered 'at risk' of offending and so had been referred for support and/or supervision to one of a number of voluntary or statutory organisations. (In some cases young people were involved with more than one organisation). A number of the young people interviewed had been under probation supervision and/or had experienced custody either in Woodlands JJC or in Hydebank Wood YOC. Eight young people were care-experienced, having lived in a range of settings including foster care, children's homes and secure care.

The research found that young people's pathways into conflict with the authorities followed the trajectory which is well-established in the literature, namely social disadvantage, alienation or exclusion from education, lack of employment prospects, family breakdown, experiences of violence and abuse, drug and alcohol use, mental health difficulties and negative peer influence. These issues were compounded by the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland, including a lack of safety within communities and fear of travelling outside of these; particularly severe and persistent social disadvantage and exclusion, and conflict with the police and paramilitary groups.

Adult workers and volunteers described the tremendous challenges which young people faced in their daily lives:

> It's always a myriad, different things: accommodation, family issues, mental health, drugs and alcohol use, involvement in crime, coming out of custody, rehabilitation, re-adjusting, relationships, parenthood (Adult 4).[3]

Family backgrounds
Some of the young interviewees had stable family backgrounds, but abuse and violence within the family and in other contexts was a reality for some of them and for other young people known to workers and volunteers.

> A lot of the girls have been physically abused, sexually abused, or whatever and they come with a lot of... baggage (Adult 6).

Some faced abuse on a routine basis, with violence often taking extreme forms:

> The first wee guy [young mentee], his idea of a Saturday night with his Mummy and Daddy was his Dad coming round at tea time after the football and beating the shit out of the Mummy, you know and [...] brothers getting kicked down the hall (Adult 12).

> My Mummy and Daddy were, they were just not meant to be with each other, they really weren't. Just arguing, fighting, just dysfunction... And we fought the bit out everyone, my brothers and sisters we fought but [it] wasn't like shouting, we did shout but... I mean the main thing was hurt. We hit and it wasn't just fists or kicks. […] We've stabbed each other... Very, very violent and I think [...] that kind of desensitises yourself (Young person 9).

This young person identified how violence in her home, including serious physical violence between siblings, impacted on her behaviour outside of the home environment:

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[3] The labels in brackets indicate whether the interview was with an adult, a child or a young person and the number (code) given by researchers to each individual interview.

[…] if you grew up with that, that becomes the norm and then, when, when I run about the street, I, I've no friends 'cos I hit them and their Mummies were like, 'stay away from her' (Young person 9).

Self-harm, drugs and alcohol
Reflecting on their experiences of harm, some of the young people spoke of their friends taking their own lives, as well as witnessing self-harm and violence in custody. One young woman recalled how she had tried to cope with being witness to self-harm and suicide attempts, during her imprisonment a few years before:

> The hardest things were when other people were trying to commit suicide […] and you could hear someone choking, and you were like two doors down from them and […] you'd be squealing at the staff, but they had to get permission to get the door open! (Young person 9).

Workers and volunteers supporting young people identified drug use as a serious problem, contributing to mental health difficulties, including self-harm and suicidal thoughts and attempts to take their own lives:

> The biggest thing that I would see since, over this last probably 10 years […] within Northern Ireland is use of drugs and how drugs affect our young people. And the readiness and availability of drugs and the behaviours that are attached to misuse of drugs [...] because obviously these young people are taking drugs at very young ages and subsequently don't really get, understand about the implications for mental health issues later on in life and as they get older and what that can mean. And the amount of suicide getting on in Belfast, all this is connected, related to drugs (Adult 7).

Young people recognised the detrimental impact of drug and alcohol dependence on their lives:

> [W]henever I would drink I'm just completely different all together (Young person 1).

Just a lot of anger and violence and running with older people then 'cos I was running about with older people […] I was doing things a lot younger than, you know, anybody else, like was doing […] drink, drugs, whatever (Young person 9).

Education

Most young people had experienced problems in the education system and many had dropped out of school at an early age. A variety of reasons were given for this. Some young people said that teachers had treated them well and that there were other factors which had contributed to their alienation from education. Others, however, felt that teachers failed to understand them, or labelled them:

I never really got on with any of the teachers at all, just to tell you the truth. Seemed to be in a big class of people, there was always messing around and stuff like that there and I don't know, I just never got on with the teachers, now. Never liked school (Young person 8).

My school was mad! It was a crazy school, like. Like it was, when if you got expelled, from other schools you went to my school – you know? (Young person 3).

For several of the young people, learning difficulties had contributed to their problems with education: 'I went to special needs secondary school, so I had no qualifications – nothing, nothing at all' (Young person 10). For a couple of young people, their frustration with education started when they were unable to pursue the subjects they liked and were good at:

I used to love doing the Irish language. I went to [the] Gaeltacht in Donegal and stuff and I wanted to […] go on to do my GCSEs and stuff in it and then 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 (Young person 3).

For young people who had been excluded and economically marginalised, it was important that they should be able to access financial support, such as the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) to allow them to continue with education. Young people who were not receiving this allowance because they were engaging with specialised vocational training provided by voluntary organisations, felt they were discriminated against:

We only get, well, for class, about £3.50 a class we're getting don't we, and I'd have about three classes a week with you? Two classes, we're talking maybe £7 a week so the money is pathetic to be quite honest. It's still a class like as if I was at Tech so I don't get why we shouldn't get it but we don't (Young person 19).[4]

Unemployment

Unemployment and boredom were significant problems. One young person had been working as a bricklayer, but became unemployed as the recession hit the building trade. During a year and a half of unemployment, 'I was getting into trouble, you know with the police and stuff and just on the road to nowhere, signing on [for welfare benefits] - doing that routine' (Young person 3). Respondents agreed that job opportunities were scarce, especially for young people with few qualifications and criminal records and some had applied for many jobs without success. This resulted in them "hanging out" on the streets, with little to do and feeling bored, leading sometimes to their participation in activities which resulted in them getting into trouble with adults and the authorities:

> I wasn't involved in any youth clubs, I wasn't involved in any organisations, I was just basically unemployed, bored, nothing to do, drinking about the streets, not even thinking about my consequences, not even thinking about how people are gonna look at me (Young person 10).

A number of recent reviews, including the Youth Justice Review, criticised the delay in dealing with cases in the criminal justice system (Department of Justice, 2011a, pp68-72). Some of the young people mentioned long periods of being on bail as disruptive to their educational and employment plans; others described circumstances in which separate charges were brought consecutively by the prosecuting authorities, which meant long processes of separate cases. This limited their chances of getting even short-term, part-time jobs or, at the other end of the spectrum, of undertaking training which required long-term commitment.

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[4] On the 11th June 2012, the Minister for Employment and Learning, Stephen Farry, announced that a separate training allowance would be provided from 2013 to 16 and 17 year olds taking part in existing programmes funded by the European Social Fund and targeted at those young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) (Department for Employment and Learning, 2012).

Young people and workers and volunteers were agreed on the need for more leisure activities and community resources to give young people something productive to do, as well as the need for more training and employment opportunities. One young man was clear about where the responsibility lay for this situation:

> It's nothing to do with young people, it's the government. The government wrecked this country for young people and young people, like me as an individual; like I feel the whole... young people have been let down (Young person 10).

Accommodation and places of safety
Finding appropriate accommodation was a huge challenge for young people especially for those with criminal convictions or those leaving prison, and voluntary groups struggled to find young people safe and comfortable places to live:

> A lot of them would still have to be on probation for a number of months after [leaving prison]. They then have to go and live in a hostel. The hostels – with what the young people say and what the volunteers then relay back – is that they're not appropriate for young people. They're putting a young person leaving the criminal justice system in an environment where adults are also vulnerable. The adults that they may be living and sharing a hostel are very high risk. They then witness and see things that they shouldn't witness (Adult 1).

In this context, young people appreciated the safe spaces provided by the different projects participating in the research and stated that these either helped them stay off the streets and engage in play and leisure, or that workers 'kept an eye' (Young person 2) on young people who were out in public places. While workers and volunteers acknowledged that young people did not always want to engage with various educational or leisure facilities in their communities, they also stressed that often those who did not comply with the rules, were excluded from various activities, without much time being given to encourage their participation:

> […] some of the local youth clubs are far too quick to exclude young people for certain behaviours. So quite often [the project] ends up working with the young people who can't, who won't engage with what is existing

within their community. It is either because they had conflict with workers in that environment or that they don't get on with other young people in that environment. It is easier for those clubs, etc to exclude young people so they don't have to deal with the conflict (Adult 3).

One young person described the JJC as providing a place of safety where he was able to remain drug-free, in contrast with his experience of living at home and in care.

Legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict
Young people and adults identified the continued impact of the Northern Ireland conflict on local communities, drawing young people into problematic and potentially dangerous situations such as rioting or bringing them to the attention of paramilitary organisations. Several workers referred to a reduction in paramilitary control of local areas, which they perceived as having led to greater availability of drugs and increased 'anti-social' and criminal behaviour; a situation which in their view was not helped by shortcomings in policing in certain areas. However, there was also an agreement amongst the workers and volunteers that paramilitary organisations continue to operate within communities and are a threat to young people's safety and well-being. Young people reflected on their experiences of contact with loyalist and republican paramilitary organisations:

> The paramilitaries used to have us tortured. I got a few hidings and all from them – remember when I was 17 I was going to get my legs blew off – that's whenever I was caught growing grass in the house and I was going to get my legs blew off [...] they used to chase you, used to get you and beat you with hurls [hurley sticks] and baseball bats. I suppose it was more of a thrill then. But whenever they came to the house with guns, going to shoot you and all – that's when they really scared me, you know what I mean? It was like 'what's going on – I'm only a kid' (Young person 4).

> It's my mate's anniversary [of his death] today. He hung himself. […] Mad. […] I know other people that have killed themselves over the paramilitaries torturing them (Young person 3).

> My cousin [...] his head was away by drugs as well and the RA (IRA) were going to shoot him, and he signed himself into hospital (Young person 4).

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Several of the young people were afraid to return to the areas they had previously lived in:

> A lot of them can't go home you know, either through threats [from paramilitaries] that they still have or the relationships that they don't have within the home (Adult 1).

One young woman spoke of the long-standing impact of conflict-related imprisonment on the lives of her and her extended family:

> That was my mindset, to get to prison. You know, everybody in my family had, well my Daddy had been in prison, my uncles had been in prison, my Granda had been in prison, his uncles, his, you know, all just prison, prison, prison. [...] they would have been all in prison for like political reasons, but they still had a hatred for the police, they still had bitterness towards courts, they still had that. So therefore, I grew up knowing that that could be played on too. You know, I didn't like the police. Nobody liked the police (Young person 9).

Consequently, this young woman had experienced pride during her initial court experience, despite this being related to an 'ordinary', rather than a conflict-related offence: 'my first fine and all, I was so proud of it.'

Family relationships
Some of the children and young people continued to have good relationships with parents who had been able to support them:

> My family is brilliant, now, Mum and Dad stuck by me through it all, like. [...] my Mum's […] doing everything she can for me (Young person 1).

However, for others, relationships with parents had become difficult or fractured, for a variety of reasons. Some parents and close relatives experienced problems themselves, for example, ill-health, mental health difficulties or addictions, and/or were unable to cope with the child's issues in addition to their own:

> I love my Mummy so much and, and, my Mummy loves me too and, but she could never, sort of, give me that support that I wanted (Young person 9).

She [grandmother] was able to sort me and all. She was grand with me, but Social Services says because of her age and all that she can't really look after me and all (Young person 8).

As a result of family breakdown and estrangement, some young people lacked a sense of belonging or feeling of security:

[Young person] was in and out of her own home, patchy home, you know, all of her life, so, spending a day here and a day there, didn't really feel like you ever had a home, did you? (Adult 17 to Young person 9).

Parents were sometimes unable to effectively deal with the young person's problems: One young woman described how her parents 'tried everything' to tackle her drugs problem – 'they grounded me, threw me out, done everything they could but they just couldn't stop me' (Young person 5).

Care-experienced young people
Many children and young people have very positive experiences of looked after care and it is important to challenge the negative media and public images of them that tend to dominate public discourse. Having said that, it is well documented that there is an over-representation of care-experienced children in the criminal justice system. This was also the case for the young interviewees and others with whom workers and volunteers were engaged:

All my young people are care-experienced, so I mean, what goes on quite commonly is sort of feelings of rejection and isolation and feeling that they don't fit in [...] in mainstream school or mainstream tech [Further Education College] they feel that people are looking at them and they just don't feel the same as anybody else (Adult 5).

The feelings of stigmatisation, loss and rejection led to some young people having mental health difficulties and coping through 'self-harming, drugs and alcohol' (Adult 5). One young person described having 'wrecked the place' in secure care (Young person 7) and although he had not been charged with this particular offence, he had subsequently received a custodial sentence for other offences. Another young interviewee who was first placed in care at the age of six months, spoke of having missed out on a 'normal' family life during his early childhood, although he was now in a very successful foster placement:

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 (Young person 18).

This young person described the instability caused by moving between placements:

As for the children's homes, that's just a totally different atmosphere all together, you've staff coming in and changing over every twelve hours and you see staff and there's different people looking after you next day. It's just not a stable, it's not a helpful environment, there's always change and, you know, you build up a good friendship, relationship with one of the staff and you have to wait a week to see them again, and if you've a problem, you don't want to talk to the other staff about it. You know, that's kind of difficult that way (Young person 18).

Hiding 'under the hood': self-esteem and confidence
Adults agreed that young people in conflict with the law or involved in risky behaviour, often lack confidence and have low self-esteem: 'Many young people don't have confidence within themselves to go out there and maybe to pursue education or pursue a job' (Adult 2):

'I've worked with a young person before and the first time I met her she was hiding under a table, you know. So like that was really, really low self esteem and scared of adults basically (Adult 5).

Young people explained what it felt like to be so anxious and lacking in confidence:

I felt like a prisoner in my own body [...] I felt so low in my confidence. I thought I was ugly. I thought maybe people look at me the wrong way and stuff, no confidence, no nothing. I just gave up (Young person 10).

Sometimes this insecurity was hidden behind a mask of defiance or even aggression, but adults described the conflicting feelings with which young people struggled daily:

He's [mentee] still acting the big man at times, you know, just like you know, prison's a gift... but there's elements whenever he ... drops his guard (Young person 9).

[...] you bring her anywhere and the hood was up [...] it took months for that hood to come down actually, that's a physical, that's a physical thing but I knew it was a, sort of a, internal battle she was having as well (Adult 17).

For young people, keeping up a front meant that they adopted a 'certain image all the time too, you can't do things like show vulnerability or show you care about how you look or how you dress or any of those sort of things' (Adult 4). Afraid of revealing any form of vulnerability, this 'mask' of independence and of not needing adults, resulted in some young people not wanting to ask for help, even where it was available. Some young people negotiated support by offering 'invitations' to adults rather than directly asking for assistance. So, a young person seeking support at court, for example, would ask the worker 'do you wanna go to court with me? ... do you wanna come to see what it's like?' (Adult 4), rather than express their vulnerability by directly asking for help. Adults tried to 'peel away' the 'layers' hiding the young person to get to know the real person inside (Adult 17).

Young people's hopes and aspirations
As a result of the lack of opportunities in education and employment, many young people 'don't have confidence within themselves' and generally display a 'lack of hope' (Adult 2). However, through their own resilience and determination, coupled with the support of the various projects young people did express hopes and aspirations for the future. They had plans to become car mechanics, chefs, youth workers, police officers, office workers, charity workers and fitness instructors. Young people spoke of wanting to 'settle down' with a partner and have families of their own. Some were already involved in further education, employment, charity or voluntary work, wanting to 'give back' their time to support other young people. Those in employment looked forward to opportunities for professional development:

I just want to do everything. I don't want to stop. But – you know what I mean – like I want to be the boss! (laughs) that's what I want to be so I just will keep going until I can sit back and say "right – I've done enough" you know (Young person 4).

Again, what was important to young people was being given a chance, even when they were in the middle of a criminal process:

> You can be on remand […] for up to two years […] and just what you gonna do for those two years, nobody seems to give you a real chance when you're on bail (Young person 1).

Significant adults

Significant adults participating in the study were introduced to the researchers in a number of ways. Some of the young people met the researchers along with a significant adult who worked with them through a project. In other cases the adult had selected a young person with whom they felt they were working well and had a positive relationship. In some cases, a child or young person had suggested that an adult with whom they had established a strong bond be interviewed. During interviews, children and young people were asked to think about their lives and about adults who had supported them, especially at difficult times. Many of the young people mentioned parents, and wanted their role to be noted, although this was not the particular focus of this study:

> My mum, she really is the one that helps me the mostly (Young person 14).

> My Ma. Because she's just me Ma, obviously like, y' know what I mean. Every Ma is important (Young person 11).

> The Dad's the man of the house; he's the one you look up to (Young person, YOC Young Voices group).

Several children and young people mentioned grandparents as having provided constant support and one spoke of having a strong bond with an older sister. However, as noted above, families were not always in a position to offer accommodation or other kinds of help, for a variety of reasons. These included young people's offending or other challenging behaviour being too much to cope with; worries about how the situation would impact on other children in the family; or because the parent or family member had their own problems with addiction and/or mental health difficulties.

Other significant adults referred to by young people, included youth workers, social workers, staff and teachers within the JJC and volunteers including mentors and church volunteers. One young man identified his doctor as an inspirational figure and constant support during a lengthy stay in a mental health facility.

Definitions of significant adult
Children and young people were asked how they would define the relationship with their significant adults and whether they saw them, for example as 'mentors' or 'befrienders', 'key workers' or 'friends'. Some young people found the terms 'mentor' and 'befriender' reminiscent of times spent in more formal settings, including state care, and consequently preferred other ways of describing their relationship. Some younger interviewees thought the term 'significant adult' sounded 'sophisticated', although other children and young people said that they did not know what the term meant, suggesting it was not plain English. One young person believed the term 'mentor' implied an unequal power relationship:

> I don't like mentor, mentor is too formal again. […] Mentor sounds like it's, like, he's like, he's above ya and he's teaching you which basically that's what it is, you know what I mean, no-one's above me, it's just, we're all, I'm not above anyone else either, you know what I mean (Young person 13).

The same young person described the worker as being 'like a friend basically':

> Like [X]'s a professional but you know what I mean I wouldn't see him as a youth worker, I'd just see as a mate, you know what I mean […] I speak to him the way I speak to anyone, you know there is no difference the way I speak to him than speak to likes of my friend [...] That's what I think a significant adult is, like, not someone who's like a little bit in a position of power or can change, like, your lifestyle or something but somebody, somebody you can just sit and chill out with (Young person 13).

Similarly, some adults found the term 'mentor' too rigid and felt that it failed to reflect the work they really do. They also felt that the formality and other negative connotations of the term could alienate a young person:

I'm not sure I would wanna say to somebody 'I want a mentor' and part of that is probably about my own pride and sense of self-determination which, you know[...] some young people would have as well. Part of it, it sounds a bit too structured. This is the formal role, does it mean I am gonna have to do things with this person or what, you know? And I think at that age it's very hard for people to say 'yes, I need help, I need support', in that kind of sense (Adult 4).

Workers and volunteers described their role using different terms, as the following exchange shows:

Researcher: How would you describe your relationship with a young person - youth worker, significant adult, a very important adult, key worker?

Adult 3: I would see myself as a support person to that young person. Not a *support worker* as such 'cos that's not what my work is about, it's not what it's meant to be about, but it can be, can be whatever they make it, whatever they want it to be really, it has to be flexible, it has to be, you know, different for each case.

Some workers described themselves as being in a position akin to a 'parenting' role, while others sought to form friendships with young people. Yet others perceived the role as having a more formal basis, especially if they played a supervisory as well as a support role but even in these cases, workers often described the relationship as a friendship, albeit one defined within the remits of their professional obligations:

A friend I would say. [...] in a professional manner as such too, because we have to be professional [...] I think to myself, oh, maybe I shouldn't have said that, but then it's letting, it's keeping a bit of normality with them, without devolving [sic] too much about yourself (Adult 6).

Another participant preferred the term *'trusted adult'*:

I like the term 'trusted adult' and somebody that they can talk to if they need to talk to whoever and whatever. I think I have a specific role in that, you know, I can support them in achieving their potential.

But I'm not there, like, to make them do anything that they don't want to do so it's them having the motivation and the initiative and then me supporting them along the way (Adult 5).

One young person, who had also been a mentee in the past and now worked as a mentor to other young people, resisted any attempt to label the role:

I wouldn't even define myself. I just do it. D' you know what I mean? (Young person 9).

What is clear is that different definitions reflect the role of the adult through the use of terms, such as 'significant adult', 'support person', 'trusted adult' and 'mentor'. In some cases the significant adult may also be someone who is not necessarily viewed as 'a positive role model', especially by those outside of the immediate relationship:

There's another one of the young people in […] Hydebank […] and he was talking about his Da a lot. He would always listen to his Da and if he listens to his Da, things work out right. Now, his Dad is well known to the justice system and wouldn't be seen as a *positive role model*. But for, for him, this young person, this guy is the one, he's the only one he listens to, and he's probably the only one I would say who can control him' (Adult 4, respondent's emphasis).

They don't necessarily have to have a good job though, or be someone who *doesn't* do crime. It could just 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 (Young person, JJC Young Voices, respondent's emphasis).

The qualities of a positive relationship
As stated earlier, some of the young people in the study were involved in projects on a purely voluntary basis and in other cases the relationships between children and young people and workers and volunteers had developed following referrals to the different projects as part of a criminal justice disposal. As most of the projects worked on a voluntary basis, it was important that young people and adults 'clicked' at the beginning of the relationship and even where the relationship was imposed by the justice process, adults and young people agreed that it was most likely to be a positive experience where the young person and

adult got on well together. Sometimes relationships worked because the adult and young person had a good connection with each other or shared similar experiences, for example, of addictions, or of being in prison. Young people often wanted to connect with someone who they could count on, as one young man, who could not return home while on bail, recalled:

> I wasn't told I had to do it or whatever, like, but just wanted, you know, 'cos easier talking to her as well, you know, if I struggle to, to adjust, it's a big, big change (Young person 1).

A key theme running throughout the discussion about negotiating and building successful relationships with significant adults was being at ease with the adult. Moreover, issues of 'trust', 'care', 'understanding', being a 'listening ear', 'someone who sorts things out' were central to their accounts. The level of appreciation from young people towards the significant adults is evidenced by the quotes below. This is just a small sample, but is representative of the general feeling:

> He's just likeable, you know what I mean, he's just a nice person basically, you know what I mean. You couldn't not like him, I mean, there's no-one, no-one, there's no young person walking through that door who's not liked [the worker] (Young person 13).

> He's good at his job. There's not one bad point I can say about [the worker]. Every time I need [him], he's there. He does do his job professional and he, out of hours, am sure if he's out of hours, out of his business and I need something. I know I can contact him (Young person 10).

Young people were keen not to 'let down' or disappoint these adults:

> I didn't want to let him down. Because he was the only person that ever probably cared [...] do you know what I mean? But he's meant to by law, but he really showed me, so he did (Young person 4).

Being heard

For many young people regardless of the nature of the programme, whether it was run by the Youth Justice Agency or a non-statutory agency, a good relationship with an adult was based on being listened to, heard and respected and treated in a non-judgemental way.

> She's (NGO worker) nice. Dead on. Easy to talk to and all that (Young person 14).

> She's (JJC worker) a *legend*. She's just here to, you know, talk to you, so you don't feel, you know, alone (Young person 11).

> They are easy going and are talking to you like you are a person (Young person 16).

One young interviewee also felt strongly that lawyers should treat young people with respect, keep them informed about the court process and be reliable. Although lawyers may not come under the category of 'significant adult' he firmly believed that they should adopt the same qualities of respect and care.

Having choices and being able to articulate their wishes within the relationship was important for young people:

> What makes this one [foster placement] work is that I'm actually old enough to be able to have an input into the relationship. All the other ones, I would, I was really young and I was told what to do and you know, I wasn't given an option because I was a child (Young person 18).

Young people and adults felt that relationships and projects were more successful when young people played an active part in the decision-making process about what type of support they needed and how it was to be provided. Being young people-led was less easy to achieve in relationships governed by statutory considerations, for example, court ordered supervision, where young people were likely to have requirements or restrictions placed upon them, but even within this context, workers said that they tried to involve young people as far as possible in decision-making, for example in relation to what activities they might do. In voluntary arrangements, such as mentoring, volunteers preferred to make it clear to young people that it was up to them whether to pursue the relationship or not, and what way to make use of the time with the mentor.

Similarly, youth workers were keen to ensure that young people directed the relationship as far as possible.

Mutual respect

Young people appreciated a sense of humour, so long as they knew that the jokes did not imply a lack of respect. They also appreciated it when adults were able to accept jokes about themselves: 'he's easy to talk to I guess, he can take the "slagging" (Young person 13). 'Straight talking' was appreciated: 'There's no back doors, there's just honesty' (Young person 13). Young people prided themselves in recognising workers and volunteers who were 'real' and who genuinely cared about them, and in being able to see through people who were dishonest or patronising. Asked by a researcher: 'How would you like adults to treat you?', a young person answered 'Just to treat me in a good way. Just to treat me well' (Young person 14). Being respected was important when young people had experienced being disrespected by many adults in their lives:

> He didn't treat you like the rest of them [adults working in the criminal justice system]. Most of them looked at you as if to say [makes a tutting sound]. There was a couple of one's there I didn't like and they would turn their nose down on you so they would and all. 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 person 8).

> Don't be judgemental. People judge you (Young person 4).

Building self-esteem

As discussed above, many of the young people lacked confidence and every participant believed that encouraging young people's self-belief was important:

> She was very inspirational, she could see stuff in you that like, you didn't see in yourself and she made you feel like you could achieve stuff […] if you did wrong she would tell you, you did wrong […] Like, she was very sensible, she was very down to earth, but then she got the best out of you and she made you want to get the best out of yourself (Young person 3).

> I think it's just that they [project workers] make you believe that you *can* do it. [...] They're able to turn round and you know 'I can't do this, I can't do this', and they would like, 'Get a grip – yes, you can d'you know?

And they just make you feel that you *are* able to [respondent's emphasis] (Young person 3).

The circumstances in which adults were trying to build young people's self-esteem were difficult, given the shortage of employment opportunities in particular:

> Getting rejected a lot knocked my confidence and then you end up just giving up trying' (Young person 3).

Understanding the pressures and giving young people a chance
Young people wanted to be 'given a break' and were more inclined to develop positive relationships with adults who understood the pressures in their lives. They believed that it was important to 'just give young people a chance' (Young people 6 and 7). Young people also appreciated the relaxed atmosphere of the voluntary organisations they engaged with:

> The way they get on with each other, you know, out of work as well, it's like in the work, it's not like an office environment, it's like a community sort of almost (Young person 13).

Interviewees agreed that establishing boundaries was important, but young people appreciated being given a little leeway when they slipped up, for example, when they were late or missed appointments:

> I used to come in and say "[…] I'm not in the mood today!" and then we would reschedule the appointment for a different date (Young person 8).

Patience was seen as an important virtue, and in this context one young person described the support offered by a family friend:

> 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 (Young person 3).

Some adults also understood very well the need for flexibility in working with young people in need and one mentor in particular valued this in his work:

The most important thing for me is to have a non-judgmental attitude and to become a best friend. You know if you get it all wrong, if you go back to where you started, then you're ready to make a fresh start, come back and there'll be no post-mortems (Adult 11).

'Going the distance'

Finally, some young people highlighted how they valued adults who stood by them and continued to encourage them, even when young people were going through a hard time and threatened to reject the relationship:

She didn't give up, you know, even though I was pushing her away, and like, my all defences going up and I was like, this is going to be somebody else that's gonna let me down […] She didn't give up (Young person 9).

I wouldn't show up he would get into his car and he would've arrived at my house and banged at the front door – be like "GET UP"! And, d' you know he was very, d' you know – really made you *do it*, like! (laughs) (Young person 5).

Every time, like he always – even when I was like throwing the head up in hospital, going to discharge myself and all because he knew, he would just sit down and have a word with you (Young person 4).

The support offered by the significant adults

The need for practical assistance and guidance from the significant adult was a strong theme coming through the research and children and young people gave concrete examples of what this entailed. One young person in Woodlands JJC recognised his reliance on adults within the institution, 'you need them for everything in here' (Young person 12). Asked what help adults provided, he answered; 'Care, meet your needs, help you out when you need someone to talk to, pointing in the right direction. Things like that. Across the projects workers and volunteers helped young people to access services, including educational, health and welfare services: 'they [social worker] know how to get things done and they know what services to get in contact with and stuff like that' (Young person 19). Specific examples of support listed by young people included learning how to make telephone calls, preparation for education and job interviews and filling in application forms:

I couldn't use the phone. I was terrified, you know, using the phone for phoning the doctors to make a doctor's appointment [...] It was like, right, you need to do this now, you need to do it, so was teaching me, really teaching me, like (Young person 9).

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. Because my dad [...] can't get down, so he can't help me with stuff (Young person 14).

Significant adults played an important role in providing both practical and emotional support for young people in achieving 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, like, I probably be taking it easy all the time (Young person 1).

I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for [the name of the organisation] or for people giving me a chance in life, giving me that second opportunity (Young person 10).

She [social worker] helped me get through things. I've got, been through very difficult times, near enough killed myself at times and she's always been there, y' know, try and help me to pick up the pieces and show me how to go about things and just carry on (Young person 19).

One of many positive cases demonstrates how one-to-one work, the art of listening and provision of practical support can bring about real improvements in young people's lives. This young woman, who experienced rejection and exclusion and had a history of truancy, had managed in two and a half years to gain a number of qualifications:

[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 person 19).

Another young person who had previously experienced difficulty in getting work because of his criminal record, with the support of the project worker had been accepted on to a catering placement, which he had thoroughly enjoyed:

> Oh, it was an experience because I didn't know what way a kitchen worked. ... It was just cutting veg and just prepping for the service ... but it was great to get the feel of it' (Young person 3).

Encouragement and practical support through difficult times was considered important by young people and adults alike:

> The rejection was there every week [because of failed job applications] it was a case of trying to keep encouraging him, one of these days it will happen. One of these days it will happen (Adult 10).

One–to-one support
Staff on projects visited by the researchers, worked with children and young people in different ways, in terms of the frequency of meetings, the nature of 'activities' and types of support provided to them. While some worked on a structured approach of regular weekly meetings, others provided extended education sessions or combined individual support with group work. Irrespective of the arrangements in place, participants agreed on the importance of providing one-to-one support for children and young people. It was by building an individual relationship based on trust that young people were able to work through difficult personal issues:

> I met her [the worker] one night when I was out on the streets – whenever I was drinking. She talked everything through with me. I just thought I could trust her. So I started working one-to-one with her (Young person 2).

Many of the young people, initially at least, felt too insecure to work within a group context and for them one-to-one support was vital:

> I do one-to-one so they come out to me and, instead of going into groups, 'cos I'm not good with groups (Young person 19).

A teacher, working with a voluntary organisation which provided education for young people who were outside of formal education, agreed on the importance of one-to-one support.

'Young people are keen to learn', he said, 'but suffer from low self-esteem and group learning may not be possible until their confidence and skills have improved'. Developing one-to-one relationships is resource-intensive and requires dedication on the part of the adult, and commitment from the young person, but all agreed on the importance of having time to build and maintain individual relationships:

> They don't want your money, they don't want your food […] they want the time (Adult 17).

Sustainable funding for projects in this context is particularly important. Lack of security of funding was a grave concern to both voluntary and statutory organisations:

> We finish again on the 31st and we still haven't been told whether we come in on Monday morning to work or not. […] that is always in people's minds (Adult 3).

Recreational activities
Most of the young people mentioned enjoying 'activities' and trips out with volunteers and workers. This included going out for something to eat; sporting activities; bowling; cinema and even practical activities, such as cooking together. One young person emphasised the difference between an 'activity', which he saw as something formal that happened in the children's home and his trips out with an NGO worker which were considered to be relaxation:

> He'd just bring you out for the day like going on, go bowling or go carting or something, do you know what I mean and what else, you just need to be easy going, just… Just chill out, you know what I mean?' (Young person 13).

Such 'activities' are often about respite or just doing things that others take for granted, but which these young people have been deprived of:

> 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 (Young person 18).

Involvement of families and communities

Staff on some of the projects sought to work with young people's families and other support networks in order to provide additional assistance and to ensure that the young person would be supported after the engagement with the programme had ended:

> She [the worker] has a really good relationship with my Mummy as well. […] My Mummy thinks it is great support (Young person 2).

Youth workers felt it was important to understand the communities the young people lived in:

> We know who these young people are. We know where they live. We know the relationships they have within the community and they know that they can trust us (Adult 2).

Being aware of community and cultural sensitivities was also important. Several workers and volunteers had worked with young people from the Traveller community and they highlighted the need to adapt the processes to meet cultural expectations. Strong family ties within the Traveller community were also perceived as providing an important source of support for young people and the workers and volunteers believed that it was important to build on these.

Engagement with a wider circle of support was important to both non-governmental and statutory agencies. Staff in the JJC stated that they aim to involve families, community partners and projects and other statutory agencies in working with the young person in custody and on release, so as to ensure that they are getting 'the best possible package' (Adult 7). New initiatives within the community included 'circles of support' which are being developed in Greater Belfast and the North West by the Youth Justice Agency.[5] These are designed to be young person-led giving them an opportunity to decide who to invite into their 'circle'. Workers commented that the main aim of the circles is to ensure that once the professionals, for example, Youth Justice Agency workers, are no longer involved with the young person, they can rely on a support network within their own family and/or community.

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[5] Those started under the name of the Priority Youth Offender Programme in 2009 (http://www.youthjusticeagencyni.gov.uk/priority_youth_offender_project/).

Significant adults and desistance from offending

The focus of the interviews was not primarily on desistance from offending, but several of the young people raised this as an issue themselves when discussing their lives and the support offered by their significant adult. Regarding contact with the criminal justice system, many of the young people took a great deal of responsibility for their own behaviour, even in the most difficult of life circumstances:

> It was my own fault, it was me, it was my own, my own problem. You know, it wasn't like, I think, if I had been able to open to someone then, it probably could have helped (Young person 1).

> Yeah, it was just me, it wasn't really anyone's fault in here, it was just me […] just being stupid and just making stupid decisions (Young person 13).

However, young people also recognised the importance of the support offered by the significant adults, and where relevant, the organisations they worked for, in helping them to desist from offending behaviour:

> Whenever I lived in the children's home, I had, I've been arrested for several things. I've been arrested for assaulting people, for burglaries, theft, for being in a stolen car [...] criminal damage, a whole range of 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 person 18).

The decision to 'change' their lives sometimes came at a huge cost to young people's personal relationships:

> My old lifestyle, if I wanted to change, I had to move away from it. And to move away from my family and that was so hard, that was so, so hard to do (Young person 9).

Older interviewees in particular were very determined to make their lives different and more positive. This determination often came from a desire not to return to the criminal justice system and at other times it was attributed to the process of maturation:

> I couldn't survive there [prison] […] I'll be leaving in a box if I ever went back into prison and that kinda fuelled me (Young person 9).

> I moved away from crime, crime is not the answer, if you've got a problem, you deal with it maturely (Young person 10).

As the various projects in which young people were involved, were quite different in their remit, workers, volunteers and young people understood 'change' in a variety of ways and most interviewees rejected the notion that 'successful change' can be measured in one particular way. Interestingly, whilst some of the projects, particularly those in the statutory sector, were focused on addressing offending behaviour, very few of the workers saw that as the principal aim of their work with young people. Several interviewees underlined the need to look beyond the young person's offending behaviour to see that young person as an individual:

> I don't have to like what they are doing to like the young person. […] We are to instil [in] them that they choose the path that they are choosing and that there are other paths that they could be choosing, much more positive ones. […] we normally end up with the young person quite often when they are at crisis point […] So they have parents on their back, school teachers who don't really want them at school because they are a problem and they have police officers on their back […] we are usually the only friendly voice that they see or hear (Adult 3).

The young people interviewed for the research were keen to desist from offending, however, the achievements that they and the adults described were often about breaking 'wee barriers' (Young person 9), getting the confidence to do what others take for granted, for example, making a telephone call to book a doctor's visit, or even being able to hold a conversation:

> I know I could talk to anyone now […] Now I could but before I wouldn't. I would be here, just give you a few words answers (Young person 1).

What young people and the workers and volunteers valued about their relationships was that those steps were recognised as positive no matter how small they may have seemed to external observers.

Ultimately, as one of the volunteers commented:

> Young people need to know that there is, that they actually have a hope of a changed life and I think the ultimate goal is a changed life and I mean change one for the better obviously and whatever that means for someone to change their life for the better may mean your own home and a job and whatever it is to that person. And a changed life, I suppose you can't measure that either. It is whatever that person needs and I suppose people are put in that someone's life to fulfil that need for that person (Adult 17).

Why do adults want to be there for young people?
For the workers and volunteers, being a significant adult to a young person was often part of their job, although many of those interviewed went beyond their job descriptions in providing support. Adults made themselves available outside of working hours, or took a particular personal and caring interest in the young person that exceeded what could be professionally expected:

> We go beyond what others do and often we question ourselves when you're standing in your house at 12 at night and on the phone to a young person – what am I doing here? We do it because we care and because for some young people, they have nobody else (Adult 2).

Volunteer mentors provided a range of reasons for their involvement in supporting young people, which included personal development; being a parent themselves and thus identifying with young people's needs; religious convictions or a desire simply to contribute to society. For some mentors, it was because they themselves had been in prison and wanted to help young people in similar situations. A few had been mentored themselves in the past and decided that 'the best thing to do is to pass it on' (Young person 9). For others, not receiving help when they were in need or coming out of prison, had motivated their desire to create a more supportive experience for young people. Sharing experiences of contact with the criminal justice system was perceived as important in inspiring young people to believe that they too could change their lives:

> The fact that they've [mentors] lived perhaps a similar life or not too dissimilar life to themselves just a few years before, the fact that it's an obvious role model. It's somebody that they can actually aspire to be.

It's not somebody that they believe is out of their reach – they can see somebody that's also been within the criminal justice system and made their lives and improvement. That's more realistic for them (Adult 1).

The adults interviewed were appreciative of the mutual learning that occurred in their relationships with young people. One adult who now has a long-standing and more 'mother-daughter-like' relationship with a young woman admitted to struggling with her own initial response to someone who had been in prison. She acknowledged how the relationship has changed her approach over time:

She's probably softened me 'cos, you know, […] she'd probably soften most people she's coming into contact with. But she's (the young person) very, very wise, very wise, all this great wisdom comes out of her (Adult 17).

Some volunteer mentors spoke of feeling honoured to have been chosen by the young people with whom they worked:

It was a real privilege to get picked, 'cos they actually pick who they want to work with […] it was great (Adult 13).

Conclusions

This research has highlighted the enormous difficulties faced by young people in contact with the criminal justice system in their everyday lives and the help which significant adults can provide in helping young people to deal with these challenges. Feedback from young people indicated that adults can assist them in accessing education, training and employment and health, welfare and leisure services. They also provide emotional support and someone to talk to who can be trusted. Young people valued practical and emotional support both of which they see as important in helping them to make more positive choices about their lives. Young people want the significant adults to be trust-worthy, reliable, 'straight talking' and honest, but non-judgemental and patient. They also like these adults to be fun to be with.

The study demonstrates that one-to-one support is crucial for young people who often have had difficulties with relationships or who may lack the confidence to engage in group activities or learning.

What is clear from the views of children and young people, as well as adults, presented in this chapter, is that the development of supportive relationships has the potential to improve outcomes for children and young people. This includes the possibility of diverting them from initial or repeated contact with the criminal justice system by providing them with the skills they need to make positive choices about their futures. Young people's achievements, however, should not be measured solely on the basis of desistance from offending. The goals which they achieved with the support of significant adults were vital to young peoples' development, although they were sometimes difficult to measure or were things which may be regarded as taken for granted, such as holding a conversation, making a telephone call or attending an appointment.

Although mentors and workers were able to provide support for young people in accessing accommodation, training and employment, it is important to note the structural barriers which they currently faced, including a housing shortage, rising unemployment and a difficult economic climate. Adults spoke of building young people up and encouraging them to complete training and apply for employment, but of applications being constantly rejected in a situation where few jobs are available. This was frustrating for both young people and the adults who worked with them. It is also important to note that the research was conducted with young people who were successfully engaged with projects. Many of these young people referred to peers who remained addicted to drugs and alcohol, in trouble with the criminal justice system or not in education, training or employment.

The concluding chapter argues that projects which provide young people with the support of significant adults are crucial in helping them to deal with complex and difficult situations. Such support is also necessary for children and young people to fully access their rights, for example, to education, employment and training, health services, accommodation and play and leisure.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The children and young people who participated in this research are among the most disadvantaged and marginalised in society. Against a backdrop of often complicated family situations, they can struggle to engage in education and training, are often excluded from the job market, may be unable to look after their health needs, including their mental well-being and may find it difficult to develop and sustain friendships, particularly if they decide to leave some of their former friends behind. The development of supportive relationships with a variety of adults who come into their lives at different stages and in different contexts may positively influence not only their practical situation, but also build resilience and foster the ability to make positive choices in the face of adversity.

1. **Profiling and Disseminating Information about the Impact of Positive Relationships between Young People and Adults**

More often than not, the most important way in which adults supported young people in this study was by just being there when they needed someone to talk to. The opportunity to be able to be open with someone who was regarded as being 'easy to get on with' and 'non-judgemental' had a positive impact on children and young people. Indeed, it was what they most valued about their relationships with support workers and volunteers or other adults and why they engaged positively with those who assisted them. This is important as some of the young people interviewed, highlighted their inability to confide in adults in their families or schools, and reluctance to trust adults, as being the reason why they got into trouble in the past.

There is a need to profile and disseminate information and research about the positive impact of relationships between significant adults and young people. It is important to highlight the good practice evidenced by youth and community workers and others and to bring this to the attention of key policy makers.

2. Need for Appropriate Funding

This research largely focused on the support provided by adults who come into the lives of children and young people in the context of project support or in the context of criminal justice sanctions. The one-to-one and group support offered by organisations, such as VOYPIC, Include Youth, Barnardo's, Prince's Trust, Opportunity Youth, Include Youth, NIACRO, the Youth Justice Agency and by many other organisations as well as individuals, such as foster carers, provide vital support to those children and young people in their time of need. In the words of one of the workers, had it not been for these organisations, 'those kids would often have nowhere to go' (Adult 11).

It is vital that organisations which give children and young people individual adult support are provided with sustainable, long-term statutory funding, particularly in times of austerity and as cuts are being made to budgets.

3. Importance of Considering Young People's Views when determining the Effectiveness of Projects

This research demonstrated the need to recognise the time required for young people to develop a range of skills in their transition to adulthood. Children and young people who are marginalised and/or come into contact with the criminal justice system or are at risk of such contact, often require more intensive and long-term support to address what can be a lifetime of disadvantage. In this context, young people, as well as their 'significant adults' expressed some concern about how their 'successes' are measured by those who provide funding for different support projects. Some suggested that the focus of certain programmes on reducing reoffending was not helpful in promoting a broader understanding of the positive, but sometimes almost unquantifiable positive changes children and young people experience while they are supported. These can be perceived as relatively minor by those outside of the relationships, for example, learning to make a telephone call, however they are of immense importance to the children and young people involved.

When measuring the effectiveness of projects, within the context of the expectations of funders, children and young people's views should be central to determining how 'success' is measured and indicators should accurately capture the significant steps young people take over time.

This should include their perceptions of the steps they have taken on their life journeys and how their progress has been facilitated by the different projects and the adults who support them.

4. **Promoting Young People's Participation and Self-determination as Key Principles through the work of Key Agencies**

The children and young people interviewed for this research said that it was very important to them to be able to make informed choices about their relationships with significant adults and in turn to be able to determine or strongly influence the choices made about their futures. Part of the reason why they engaged positively with these particular adults, was that they respected young people's sense of autonomy, offering them choices about what issues they would focus on or which activities they would take part in. Even within the statutory framework, where court orders applied and choice was more limited, workers believed it was important to give young people a sense of control over their own lives, again by allowing them to choose activities or by affording some lenience for young people who slipped up regarding supervision requirements. By encouraging children and young people to play a role in decision-making about their own lives, adults were acting within the spirit of Article 12 of the UNCRC. Clearly, this was balanced with the need to respect Article 3, the Best Interests principle. Sometimes, in their own interests children and young people needed clear direction, or protection from harm, but the young people interviewed in this study, by and large, understood and respected this.

Criminal justice agencies working with young people should base their practice on the principle of encouraging young people to participate in decision-making and promoting their self-determination. Examples of good practice in this regard should be documented, disseminated and actively promoted by key agencies.

5. **Placing Children's Rights at the Centre of Agencies' Practice**

Also in this context, the current research found that it was in respecting children's rights, that adults built successful relationships with young people, for example, through respect, protection, non-discriminatory practice, listening to young people, encouraging their participation, working for their best interests and seeking to promote all aspects of their development.

Where relationships are developed with staff and volunteers working for structured programmes, adults should place the rights of children and young people at the centre of their practice. Training for adults working with children and young people should reflect this emphasis on rights.

6. **Recognition of Significant Adults' Role in helping Young People to Access their Rights**

The majority of the literature on the role of significant adults focuses on developmental outcomes for children and young people and comes from psychological research. What is striking is that there appears to be few research studies which analyse how such relationships are linked to the implementation of children's rights and how adults can play an active role in facilitating children's and young people's access to rights. In this context, this research demonstrated that support provided to children and young people in conflict with the law, could improve their access to a variety of rights. Facilitating young people's access to training and providing them with support in gaining qualifications contributes to the implementation of the right to education (Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC) for children and young people who are often disengaged from schools or leave education early without qualifications. Support provided by adults can strengthen and encourage 'physical, mental, spiritual, moral, psychological development' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003, p4), in fulfillment of the child's right to development as protected by Article 6 of the UNCRC. Workers and volunteers who had the opportunity to work with the families of children and young people and their communities also play an important role in facilitating the protection of the rights of children and young people to have their identity and family connections respected and recognised (Article 8, UNCRC). Young people's right to play and leisure activities (Article 31, UNCRC) was also supported through the involvement of supportive adults.

Further research, including longitudinal research, should be undertaken into the role which significant adults can play in supporting children and young people to access their rights. Evaluations of and research on projects that involve building relationships between adults and young people, should consider rights as a core issue.

7. Supporting Families to Support their Children

As outlined in the literature review presented in Chapter 3, parents and carers, as well as extended family members play an important role in 'natural mentoring'. Such relationships form part of a supportive environment in which children and young people learn to deal with adverse life events, peer pressure, school problems, relationship issues and health and other difficulties that develop during the transition into adulthood.

So far as possible, and when it is in the child's best interest, contact with family including extended family should be supported. Organisations which work to support the families of children in contact with the criminal justice system, including prisoners' families, should receive adequate resourcing from the Government.

8. Recognition of the Contribution of Non-familial Adults to the Lives of Children and Young People

Non-kin adults can provide emotional and practical support, additional to that of the family. Where family support is for whatever reason not available or limited, significant adults can play an important role in young people's transition to adulthood by supporting the development of skills and attributes important to the formation of healthy relationships. For children and young people who are engaged in various projects designed to support them in their education, training and personal development, their involvement can assist in developing their confidence and improve their self-esteem, as well as their relationships with families and communities (CJINI, 2012). The experiences of children and young people conveyed in previous research show that they value a non-judgmental, non-patronising approach by adults. It is also important for children and young people to have someone who they can rely on in a time of crisis.

In many ways, the findings of this study are consistent with existing literature. The assistance which children and young people stated they needed, ranged from emotional support to dealing with practical issues, such as being accompanied to court or getting help with completing job applications. Adults were able to assist them in gaining skills, including some which may be taken for granted, such as using a telephone or making medical appointments.

Relationships with supportive adults were also perceived as improving children's and young people's self-esteem and providing vital encouragement for them to engage with education and training.

9. Recognition of the Contribution of Significant Adults in Supporting the implementation of the Youth Justice Review Recommendations

It is also important to stress that the support provided by significant adults coming into children's lives through organisations, such as those which facilitated this research and in other contexts, can play a vital role in preventing young people having further contact with the criminal justice system and in reintegrating those who have experience of it. As such, they play an important role in the implementation of standards, such as the Riyadh Guidelines in providing child-centred, community-based prevention.

10. The Need to Challenge Negative Stereotyping of Children and Young People

What was very striking in the interviews with children and young people was how they did not fit the stereotyped 'youth of today' who are often portrayed as 'more rebellious, less disciplined, more anti-social, less considerate than their predecessors' (McAlister et al, 2010a, p12). The young people in the study came across as individuals who already take and want to take more responsibility for their own lives, often in circumstances which would overwhelm many adults. They want to improve their lives and make more positive choices, despite their experiences of rejection and the numerous barriers confronting them in almost every aspect of their lives. Young people who have been in contact with the criminal justice system are stigmatised, labelled and marginalised by society and by the criminal justice system itself, and often live in fear of violence and under threat from paramilitary organisations, having to leave their homes and families behind. Those who return home or start to live independently, but are in close contact with their families, sometimes take on the role of carers for family members and are mentors for younger siblings or children and young people in their communities. They often want to 'give something back' in return for the help which they received in the past. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child and many other organisations, including the UK Children's Commissioners, have recognised the need to tackle negative media images of children and young people, throughout the UK.

There is a need to challenge negative stereotyping of children and young people, including those in conflict with the law. NICCY, through its work to date, recognises this as a priority area and this work should be continued and strengthened. Criminal justice agencies, the Executive, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the media all have a responsibility to promote more positive images of children and young people and to tackle discrimination against children.

11. **The need for NICCY to continue to highlight Structural Disadvantage and Discrimination facing Children and Young People in Northern Ireland**

For the young people participating in this study, adults supported their transitions in a variety of ways. Some young people felt that the project and individual support had helped them to avoid getting into trouble. For some, it was about providing them with something to do or a safe space where they could come and engage with others in a positive atmosphere. For most of the young people, it meant securing help in trying to reach their goals, such as getting into training or a job. Often, however, the efforts of both the young person and their significant adult were made more difficult by the lack of opportunities available and young people experienced frequent rejections, especially in relation to job applications.

The interviews conducted for this research suggest that the support of a significant adult can make a real difference to individual young people, for example, in encouraging them to undertake training courses, to work on their 'offending issues', to have confidence in themselves and to develop resilience in the face of rejection. However, it is important that the structural issues which divide society, such as poverty, social exclusion, violence, conflict and inequality, are understood as such, and are not laid at the door of individual young people or their families who come to be seen as 'disengaged', 'disaffected' or 'dysfunctional'. As Haydon (2011, p30) states, 'children and young people, individually and as a 'social group' experience 'structural inequalities' derived in the determining context of 'age'. A focus on the needs of the individual should not detract from the need to tackle social injustice at a structural level and to challenge breaches of children's rights in the wider societal context.

NICCY should continue to research and draw attention to the structural disadvantage and discrimination faced by many children and young people in Northern Ireland and the impact on their development and life histories, including on the potential for them to be drawn into the criminal justice system.

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APPENDIX 1: Organisations which assisted with the study

Barnardo's Newry Young People's Partnership (SHSCT Area Community Adolescent Service)

The Newry Young People's Partnership works with young people aged 13 to 18 and their families. The partnership provides a range of services for children and young people, as well as their families, which include supporting vulnerable young people in need and at risk; providing family support services; supporting young people's educational needs, emotional and mental well-being; facilitating family and community integration. The Partnership offers individual, as well as group-based support. Engagement with Partnership's services is voluntary but referrals are considered from Social Services (GATEWAY and Family Intervention Teams), education services (via EOTAS), CAMHS, the PSNI and Family Support Hubs. To find out more, visit: http://www.barnardos.org or http://www.familysupportni.gov.uk/1719.htm.

Include Youth

Include Youth is an independent non-governmental organisation, promoting the rights and best interests of, as well as best practice of working with, disadvantaged and vulnerable young people. The organisation supports young people who come from socially disadvantaged areas, those who have had poor educational experiences, those who are care-experienced, who have been in contact (or are at risk of contact) with the criminal justice system, struggle with alcohol or substance abuse, engage in harmful sexual behaviour or other harmful activities. Include Youth provide a range of services and support, including, but not limited to, working with young people to improve their employability potential. The Give and Take Scheme works with young people aged 16 to 21 who are classified as not in employment, education or training (NEET) to help them gain qualifications and prepare them for employment. The project also provides mentoring support. Include Youth also undertake activities aimed at influencing public policy in the areas of youth justice, youth employability and education and training. To find out more, visit: http://www.includeyouth.org.

Northern Ireland Alternatives

NI Alternatives is a restorative justice programme, promoting and developing non-violent, community-based responses to anti-social behaviour and less serious crimes. Currently, NI Alternatives have offices in North Belfast, the Greater Shankill, East Belfast and North Down.

As well as providing restorative justice interventions involving the young person, their family and the community as required, NI Alternatives engage young people in peer-led projects aimed at prevention of offending. To find out more, visit: http://www.ni-alternatives.co.uk/home.html.

Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Reintegration of Offenders (NIACRO)
NIACRO offers a range of services for children and young people in conflict with the law or who are at risk of coming into contact with the criminal justice system. The organisation also offers support to their families. The available programmes include: the Child and Parent Support Programme (CAPS) which provides intensive support to families of children aged 8 to 13 who are at risk of offending; the Independent Representation Scheme, an advocacy project for children and young people held in Lakewood Secure Care Centre in Bangor; the Independent Visitor Scheme, a befriending project for children and young people who are in care and the Youth Employability Programme which provides support to young people aged 15 to 18 with experience of the youth justice system to engage in education, training or employment. To find out more, visit: http://www.niacro.co.uk.

Opportunity Youth
Opportunity Youth provides a comprehensive range of services for children and young people aimed at supporting their personal development and helping to improve their mental and physical health, emotional well-being and self-esteem. The organisation offers a number of programmes which focus on the different aspects of young people's lives. These include (but are not limited to): CHILL (a programme supporting young people affected directly or indirectly by alcohol and substance misuse); DAISY (support for young people and their families with substance misuse issues); IFI Reaching them Young (which works with young people who feel socially excluded or isolated in their communities). Opportunity Youth also provide services, such as AD:EPT, to young people in custody. To find out more, visit: http://www.opportunity-youth.org.

Prince's Trust
The Prince's Trust is a charity working with young people who have had a negative experience of education, who are care-experienced, who are long-term unemployed and those who are or have been in contact with the law.

The Prince's Trust offers a range of opportunities to young people through education and training programmes such as the Team Programme (a 12 week personal and professional development project, offering work experience and development of skills and gaining of qualifications for future employment); Get Into Programme (offering short vocational courses for young people interested in gaining skills in a particular sector, such as retail); the Enterprise Programme (offering support to young people who present viable business ideas). The Prince's Trust also offers a 12 month mentoring support to young people leaving prison to assist them with their transition post-custody. To find out more, visit: http://www.princes-trust.org.uk.

Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC)

VOYPIC is a regional children's charity that aims to improve the lives of children and young people cared for away from home. The charity works primarily with children and young people who have an experience of residential and foster care, kinship arrangements, and leaving care up to the age of 25 years. The organisation offers a range of group work opportunities, individual support, advocacy and mentoring services. Central to its work is the desire to increase children's and young people's participation in decision making and impacting on individual and policy decisions which affect them. To find out more, visit: http://www.voypic.org.

Youth Justice Agency (YJA)

The Youth Justice Agency is a statutory body working with children aged 10 to 17 who are in conflict with the law. The YJA is responsible for the provision of community-based services (such as the delivery of diversionary youth conference plans and statutory orders), as well as custodial services for children in Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre. To find out more, visit: http://www.youthjusticeagencyni.gov.uk.

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