

WILD

Young Parents' Project

Building futures for young mums in Cornwall

WILD Young Parents

Becoming a parent is always challenging. For some young parents, the challenges are huge and can lead to safeguarding concerns about their children. WILD Young Parents runs the Building Futures project to enable young mums to overcome disadvantages and build great futures for themselves and their children. It provides the support they need to keep their children safe, enjoy being a parent, deal with issues in their lives and cope with day-to-day difficulties. Crucially, it reduces the risk of their children being taken into care.

*"I'm stronger, I'm happier,
I'm more confident. I can deal
with issues I know I wouldn't have
been able to deal with back then.*

*I can hold my head high as
a woman, as a mum, as me."*

**Young mum – two years after
finishing Building Futures**



What is Building Futures?

Building Futures is a project of Cornwall WILD Young Parents - the multi-award-winning charity which has been supporting young families in Cornwall for the last 30 years. Since 2016 Building Futures has been funded by The National Lottery Community Fund as part of their Women and Girls Initiative.

Building Futures begins by identifying young mums facing serious challenges and developing close, honest and respectful relationships with them. Short-term programmes such as parenting courses often don't work well for young parents with complex needs: they need longer-term support from a worker who really gets to know them and who they come to trust. At Building Futures, workers and young women spend time together identifying the challenges and the changes that are needed; they explore the impact of past childhood experiences and learn how caring for themselves as mothers can help them care well for their babies. Key workers advocate for young mums but at the same time build their resilience and self-esteem, so they are increasingly able to advocate for themselves. They also provide support to others in the family – their parents and their babies' fathers – especially when there are care proceedings or shared care arrangements.

Young mums find the support of each other to be vital and Building Futures includes groupwork focussed on being healthy, safe and happy with mentoring from other mums who have been through the safeguarding system and 'come out the other end'. It also provides numerous opportunities to enjoy activities and new experiences with peers: singing in a choir, family swimming, creative writing and outdoor adventures.

Building Futures also works with a wide range of agencies to build stronger, more trusting co-working relationships and develop multi-agency responses that can reduce the need for children to be taken into care.

Why is it needed?

Building Futures young mums are often subject to safeguarding interventions because their children are believed to be at risk of neglect or at risk of harm from domestic violence in the home.

The young women themselves are often current victims of domestic abuse. Some have previously been victims of sexual abuse or exploitation. An overwhelming 95% of all Building Futures mums have experienced childhood trauma or adverse childhood experiences. Half have experienced local authority or kinship care at some point during their childhood. Consequently, there are sometimes complex mental ill-health issues: depression, drug and alcohol dependency, dissociative responses and their own childhood attachment issues.

But children need parental care and attention, and babies' needs can't wait while their parents catch up. So, Building Futures provides the kind of intensive support these young mums need if they are going to parent safely and be able to give their own children the secure start in life that many did not have themselves.

What difference does it make?

Over the last four years, Building Futures has worked with 116 young mums. Careful monitoring and evaluation by Building Futures show that the project has helped young women to achieve significant improvements for themselves and their children during this period:

Building Futures reduces the likelihood of children being removed from their mums

Of the 170 children whose mums were supported by Building Futures, 119 either stayed with, or were returned to, the care of their mother. Child protection procedures de-escalated and the risk of domestic violence, substance misuse or sexual exploitation was greatly reduced. The wellbeing of babies was secured, and their speech and language development improved. Their young mums were better able to manage their own emotions, be honest about what was going on for them and take responsibility for themselves and their children.

Building Futures improves engagement with social care and legal proceedings

Over 80% of young mums supported by Building Futures had a better understanding of what was going on, were able to actively participate in the process, and have their voices heard.

"(Building Futures keyworker) provides good advice, is supportive and explains what is happening at all stages. She helps them gain confidence without building unrealistic expectations of what will happen."

Solicitor

"When I first started I had no idea how to handle certain situations. I suffered depression and anxiety, didn't have any 'mum friends' at all and really hated leaving the house. Now I have best friends and so does my son and I've been able to do a lot on my own with my son too."

Young mum

Building Futures reduces isolation and increases sources of personal support

The young women involved with Building Futures frequently develop strong friendships and reliable support networks. When some young women first come to the project, the only person they can name as an emergency contact is their baby's social worker. Building Futures reduces long-term dependence on relationships with professionals and helps young mums develop the kind of peer, family and community support that will enable them to sustain change.

Building Futures helps services to hear the voices of young mums

Building Futures works alongside Cornwall's child protection social work teams, with pre-birth and assessment social workers, with Cornwall's perinatal mental health service and midwifery and health visiting services. They advocate on behalf of young mums and support and enable them to gain confidence and have opportunities to speak for themselves. Building Futures young parents were key speakers at Cornwall's 2017 Social Work Conference. They spoke about their experiences of their children being subject to child protection and care proceedings:

"THANK YOU! As a newly qualified social worker, I'm so grateful to you for being brave enough to share your stories with us today. You're incredibly inspiring. What you have shared today will help me to be the best social worker I can be going forward. So thank you!"

Conference delegate

Why should you support it?

It's based on good evidence

In 2017 Karen Broadhurst and colleagues from the Nuffield Foundation published a major study of vulnerable mothers involved in recurrent care proceedings.¹ The research provides extensive evidence of the 'significant and multiple adverse childhood experiences' and 'unaddressed mental health issues' of young mothers which commonly feature in care proceedings. It describes how little appropriate help is generally available to them and presents a clear case for the kind of early, targeted, relationship-based support that Building Futures provides. There is also good evidence that a strengths-based collaborative approach that provides relationships of continuity and consistency will most effectively bring about change. Building Futures offers no carrot; it wields no stick: rather it puts young women into the driving seat of their own lives and gives them the skills they need for the journey ahead.

It saves money on Children's Social Care

A 2019 report from the Children's Commissioner estimates that the average spend per child supported with a Child Protection Plan is £9,300 a year.² It is £8,300 for those identified as Children in Need. But for children in care the average annual cost is £53,000.

Of course, these costs vary significantly according to the child's needs and the type of placement, but there's no denying that looking after children in care is an expensive option. In fact, using these figures, an annual investment of £100,000 in Building Futures would be recouped if they helped to prevent just two children a year from entering the care system.

¹ Broadhurst, K et al. (2017) Vulnerable Birth Mothers and Recurrent Care Proceedings Final Summary Report, Nuffield Foundation www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/rc-final-summary-report-v1_6.pdf

² Children's Commissioner (2019) Estimating Children's Services Spending on Vulnerable children, technical spend report dera.ioe.ac.uk/33781/1/cco-vulnerability-2019-spend-report.pdf

Young mums trust it and love it

The feedback from Building Futures young mums says it all:

"Everything has worked for me. I am in the same body but a completely different person. I've stopped the cycle of abuse, which I never thought I could."

"I can now leave my flat, I can go out and socialise. I've met some brilliant friends through it and we are still friends to this day."

"I trust my WILD worker. Even though she's the one who reported me to social, I still want her to work with me because I trust her. She tells me the truth."

"It helped with bonding with my son, bonding with other mums, learning how to trust people."

And it's needed in Cornwall today more than ever

Covid-19 has brought new challenges to all of us but to none more than those who are young, poor and struggling with first-time parenthood. Building Futures has adapted quickly to new ways of working to support young mums to manage isolation, mental health crises, bereavement and increases in domestic abuse.

Advocacy work has moved online, including at 'virtual' court hearings, which are painfully hard for young mums. Building Futures tops up their data and runs online practice sessions to help them participate.

And we provide a virtual hand to hold.

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