

FRIENDS

Background Information

In Ireland by the age of 13 years, 1 in 3 young people are likely to have experienced some type of mental disorder (Cannon et al., 2013). Anxiety disorders are the most frequent mental disorders in children and adolescence. The My World Survey (MWS) is the first national study of youth mental health (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012). The findings suggest that while majority of young people were functioning well across variety of mental health indicators, over one-third of young people are outside the normal range for anxiety (34.5%) and that psychological difficulties increase among young people over time.

Early intervention programmes aimed at reducing the prevalence of anxiety in children is both necessary and beneficial. According to the WHO (2004) progressive early prevention and intervention initiatives to reduce anxiety problems among children are essential to prevent further problems manifesting into adulthood. Given that many anxiety disorders develop early in life, effective early intervention and prevention programmes represent a significant opportunity to prevent a great deal of suffering for individuals and their families. In addition, early intervention programmes are cost-effective, with the ability to target large groups of young people, potentially reducing future professional services.

The FRIENDS Programme, an Australian based programme developed by Paula Barrett is the only programme recognised by the WHO in the treatment of anxiety. Given the vast amount of evidence to support the effectiveness of this programme Carlow Regional Youth Service engaged in negotiations with Paul Barrett and were successful in gaining two license which not only ensure that the programme is delivered to young people in Carlow, but the provision of training to youth work staff in Ireland is well underway, ensuring that young people attending all youth projects can avail of the benefits of the programme.

Youth Work and the FRIENDS Programme

It is estimated 382,615 young people (46% male and 54% female), which represent 43.3% of the total youth population aged between 10-24, participated in and benefited from the various activities and programmes provided by youth organisations throughout Ireland during 2011(IIEC, 2013). In Ireland the Youth Work Act, 2001 provides the definition and direction for youth work "A planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young people through their voluntary involvement, and which is complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations.'. Youth work is delivered mainly in informal community based settings and is complementary to formal education. Other characteristics include strong emphasis on building personal and social competencies and its use of a flexible approach. Finally, the definition clearly articulates youth work as being educational and elective, structured and systematic. The majority of activities provided by youth work organisations include recreational, arts and sports-related activities

(80%), welfare and wellbeing (50%), and issue-based activities (39%) such as substance and alcohol misuse (IIEC, 2013). It is unsurprising that over half of activities delivered by youth work organisations are based around welfare and wellbeing, considering that the recommendation from the European Council on the contribution of youth work included the need for an increased focus on health and well-being of young people. Youth work, through its emphasis on well-being, contributes to a range of policy outcomes for young people, most notably in the areas of promoting positive mental health. While recognising the distinctive functions of youth work, greater emphasis could be placed on identifying the contribution youth work can make to these broader policy areas. The National Health Promotion Strategy (2000-2005) identified a range of population groups, settings and topics for health promotion action. This strategy clearly named youth organisations and the out-of-school settings as having an essential role in promoting health with young people.

The Youth Work Approach to delivering this programme

Voluntary participation

Pace of the programme suits the needs of the young people

Community Setting

Relaxed environment

The above elements are instrumental in the success that Carlow Regional Youth Service has seen first-hand through the delivery of the programme with the young people. The effectiveness of the programme matched these elements; ensure better outcomes for young people in the reduction of anxiety and the increase in their resilience.