



STAY TRUE  
TO YOU

# Insights pack



# Introduction

Stay True to You has been shaped by research\* we've conducted with young people and practitioners from across the Thames Valley. Over the course of 12 months, we spent time in youth services asking what causes violence? How might it be prevented? What can help young people to stay safe? And, crucially, how can adults better communicate with young people so they can make their own, positive choices?

Young people told us how they see the world and what adults can do to best support them. The following insights help you understand the origins, and importance of, the Stay True to You approach.

\* We commissioned qual research with 50 young people, 25 youth practitioners across 8 settings in the Thames Valley



# Who is this for?

## **For practitioners**

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Those working with young people, including teachers, youth workers, sports coaches, community volunteers. You all have a vital role in helping reach and support young people.

## **For parents/carers/families**

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To help inform the conversations you have with your children and their friends.

## **For young people**

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To help you think about how you feel and question the extent to which you recognise what other young people have said.

# An intentional focus on positivity & safety

**“I guess I’m aware of knife crime – but it’s not something that’s happened to me directly. I’m more involved in whatever dramas are going on in my life....”**

Thankfully, most young people haven’t experienced knife crime; despite high profile incidents, it remains relatively rare. While some young people talked about extreme violence, most think about safety in a broader sense, worrying more about “issues”, “drama”, or “beef.”

These issues could include minor disagreements between friends, being teased or feeling embarrassed. But they can also easily escalate into more serious issues including physical or cyber bullying, sexual abuse, aggression and violence.

All too often campaigns targeting widespread groups of young people focus on the very extreme and negative behaviours of the minority. In doing so they’re not speaking to the many young people who aren’t committing acts of violence.

Furthermore, when communicating about violence, whilst tempting to use imagery of knives as a deterrent, research\* proves that this actually increases fear and therefore the rates of young people carrying weapons.

Given all the above, a core principle of Stay True to You is positivity and being what is known as ‘trauma informed’. This means we want to use an empowering approach that encourages young people to be themselves, but is also sensitive to the needs of those young people who are vulnerable. We don’t want to unintentionally suggest that all young people are committing acts of violence, when they’re not. We don’t want to actively contribute to the behaviours we’re trying to prevent.

For that reason, Stay True to You is not an “anti-knife crime” approach, it’s a “pro-safety” approach.

\* <https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2022-11/2022%20More%20Harm%20Than%20Good%20-%20Knife%20Images%20on%20Social%20Media%20report%20pdf.pdf>  
<https://academic.oup.com/policing/article-abstract/doi/10.1093/police/paac045/6567653?login=false>



# The fear is real and can be a driver to violence

**“Don’t tell me everything is okay. It can feel like violence is all around me. The fear is real.”**

Many things influence a young person’s level of fear. It’s not just what they’re experiencing, it’s what they’re hearing, seeing, and believing from peers, social media, and wider society. Each contributes to a notion of being in danger. For some young people, violence feels very real to them, even if it’s not in their immediate circle.

Crucially, this fear influences their behaviour. Young people and youth workers were clear that one of the biggest causes of knife crime and violence is fear. It creates a sense of the need to protect oneself from threats, often leading to the misguided thought that carrying a weapon would achieve this.

Another principle of Stay True to You is about recognising the reality. Simply telling a scared young person ‘everything is fine’ doesn’t reflect their perceived reality. Instead, it dulls their instincts, and makes them feel unheard, disconnected.

They need support from someone who will listen to them and validate their concerns. They also need someone who can help them seek a true picture of what’s going on around them, help them ask themselves questions about their own responses, and help them make their best choices on staying safe, including making it clear who they can go to for help.



# We're going to walk our own path

**“I'm going to make my own choices, trust my gut on what to do. Because it all starts with staying true to yourself.”**

Young people told us they usually know when a situation is about to get too deep and when to steer clear. Many inherently knew the 'right' way to behave and offered up many practical and emotional examples of how to keep themselves and their friends safe. However, when up against strong peer influences or operating in a state of fear, most admitted to needing a bit of adult support to help them reach the best decisions. They told us it was often thanks to the careful words, support, and guidance of a trusted adult that they'd been able to make the right decisions in certain situations.

Young people also told us repeatedly that they like being treated as equals, respected, and listened to. That they want to make choices for themselves and be independent.

This gives us the very essence of the Stay True to You approach. As adults who work and live with young people, let's help them to feel better equipped to handle tough situations for themselves. This is not about adults absolving their responsibility for young people's safety. It's about helping young people to better trust their instincts, stay true to what they believe is the right way to behave and stay out of harm's way. It's about fostering a sense of agency and empowering these skills within young people whilst also helping them understand who else can help them.



# Staying calm starts with yourself

## “Prevention starts with staying calm.”

Many young people understand that their own behaviours, social skills, and ability to self-regulate can change the outcome of a situation, whether in the real world or online. They instinctively get that violence is not the answer, and there's a definite appetite amongst young people to find 'another way' of dealing with things, through better communication and management of emotional responses.

But it's important they're shown how. Therefore, the Stay True to You approach involves supporting adults to empower young people to develop and acknowledge their own skills around:

- The ability to plan ahead – practically where and when they should go, what or who to avoid. Also, to consider how their actions could have consequences for them and others further ahead.
- Recognising when to take a breath – the importance of staying calm – how to defuse a situation or de-escalate conflict.
- Knowing when, who and how to ask for help – this won't always be parents but there is always someone else.

# Be more youth worker – the important role of trusted adults

**“A good conversation is when we’re all equals. It’s like when we speak to a really good youth worker.”**

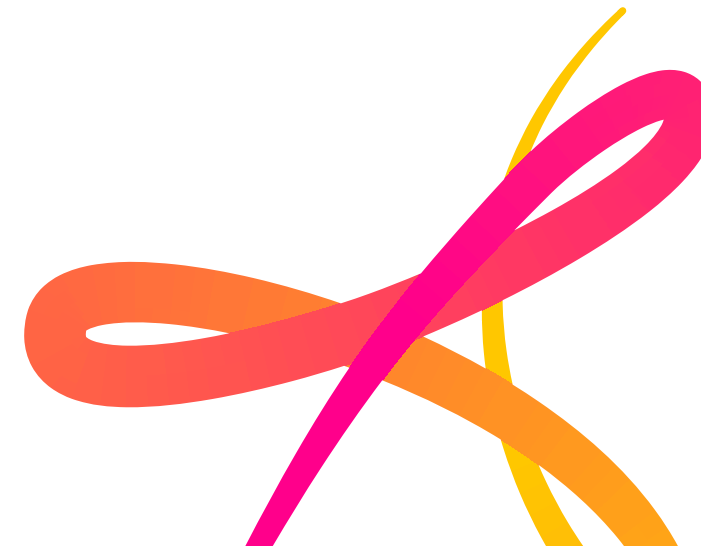
We cannot and do not expect young people to be the only ones responsible for their safety. They need adults to teach them to trust their instincts and make good decisions, which we often saw when observing the relationship between young people and youth worker.

Young people tend to think of ‘trusted’ adults as those who treat them as an equal, who don’t judge and aren’t afraid to tell the truth (in an honest yet gentle manner). In return, when this level of trust is reached, young people are more likely to listen to that adult, respect their opinion, take their advice, and go to them when they need help.

At the heart of this trusting relationship is the ability to have a quality conversation where a young person feels listened to, able to open up, and safe, both physically and emotionally.

The most trusted adults typically include professional practitioners like youth workers, sports coaches, family members, friends’ parents and community leaders. Many young people were more guarded towards parents, teachers, and police officers for fear of judgement or discipline – as adults we need to accept this, assess how we can address this and think about who else can play a supportive role in a young person’s life.

Therefore the Stay True to You approach supports and reminds ALL adults they have a very important role in a young person’s life.





# So what can you do to help?

It boils down to this. We all want young people to stay safe. To do this we need to understand where they're coming from, listen more to what they're experiencing and find ways to better communicate with them. Through listening, creating space for quality conversations and meeting them with empathy, not judgement, we can all help them grow up more confident of overcoming fear, to make positive choices for themselves and know how to ask for help if they need it.

Visit [www.StayTrueToYou.co.uk](http://www.StayTrueToYou.co.uk) for more information.



Produced by the Thames Valley Violence  
Prevention Partnership, supported by  
Claremont Communications



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