

The role of trusted adults in young people's social and economic lives

Abstract

In moving towards adulthood, young people make formative choices about their social and economic engagement while developmentally seeking autonomy from parents. Who else then contributes to guiding young people during this formative life-stage? This article explores one contributing relationship: relationships with trusted adults. Past research has shown that these adults provide motivational, emotional or instrumental support to young people, but less is known about how and why their support is appropriate particularly during young adulthood.

Using qualitative data from an Australian Research Council-funded study, the article explores how and why trusted adults are important and influential, detailing how they talk, what they offer and how their role differs according to young people's level of engagement or disengagement from education/employment. The article explores how the trusted adult relationship is developmentally appropriate for young people and outlines implications for policy and future research.

Key words: young people; trusted adults; social and economic engagement; education; employment.

1. Introduction

The life-stage in which young people move from adolescence to adulthood is a time of competing priorities. Theories of emerging adulthood highlight that in moving towards adulthood, young people make increasingly important decisions about their social and economic futures, especially as they navigate formative choices about their education, work, relationships and worldviews (Arnett, 2000). Yet developmental perspectives show that, simultaneously, young people move away from some of the key people who might help guide their decision-making. In particular, while family remains an important influence (Cobb-Clark & Ribar, 2009), the move to adulthood is a time when young people begin to seek autonomy from parents (Aquilino, 2006; Chan & Chan, 2013). This means that at a time when young people may still need adult guidance for formative decisions, they may not always want to seek this support from parents (Aquilino, 2006). Who then guides them through this complex period of life?

This article explores one relationship that may contribute to guiding young people: relationships with trusted adults outside the home. These relationships may become apparent as young people extend their identifications and connections (Worth, 2009) and seek belonging outside their family (Oliver & Cheff, 2014). Not all young people have consistent trusted adults in their lives, particularly where they lack social or cultural capital (Carter, 2005; Louie, 2012), however these relationships are common. From an ecological perspective, trusted adult relationships may occur where young people extend their relationships across their micro- and meso-systems (immediate/extended family, school, peers), exo-systems (communities) and macro-systems (societal structures, services) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

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3 In these various settings, young people may meet and develop relationships with a range of
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5 adults who they come to trust. Literature on the concept of trust suggests that trusted
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7 adults are adults with whom young people are willing to be vulnerable or whom they are
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9 willing to risk relying on, because they believe the adult will protect their wellbeing and be
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11 reliable, competent, honest and open, regardless of whether the adult also has an ability to
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13 control them (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Two
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15 further features are also important in defining trusted adults.
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20 Firstly, trusted adults are someone other than young people's parents. They may include
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22 extended family (grandparents, aunts, uncles, older cousins), teachers, parents of friends,
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24 family friends, neighbours, youth workers, coaches or tutors (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003;
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26 Galbo, 1986; Hendry, Roberts, Glendinning, & Coleman, 1992; Scales & Gibbons, 1996). For
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28 this reason, trusted adults are also often called 'important non-parental adults' (e.g. Beam
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30 et al, 2002; Ahrens et al, 2011).
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35 Secondly, trusted adults differ from formal mentors. Trusted adults are adults who young
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37 people have independently *chosen* to trust, rather than someone who has been assigned to
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39 them for a formal mentoring purpose (Dang & Miller, 2013; Greeson & Bowen, 2008). Thus
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41 trusted adults are either embedded within young people's natural networks, rather than
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43 being formally-provided (Dang & Miller, 2013), or are professionals who were formally
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45 assigned to young people for a purpose other than mentoring (e.g. assigned as a teacher),
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47 but with whom a young person has then developed a *chosen* trusted rapport. For this
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49 reason, trusted adults are also often called 'natural mentors' (DuBois and Silverthorn, 2005;
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51 Dang and Miller, 2013) or 'informal mentors' (McDonald et al, 2007).
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3 Much literature has highlighted that trusted adults assist young people in important ways.
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5 Their support can range from believing in young people and encouraging them to succeed
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7 (Chen, Greenberger, Farruggia, Bush, & Dong, 2003; Hendry et al., 1992) to providing
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9 concrete assistance with school, work or finances (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Chen
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11 et al., 2003; Erickson, 2006; Liang, Spencer, Brogan, & Corral, 2008).
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16 When young people have a trusted adult who provides support, they are more likely to be
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18 engaged in education (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005b), ambitious in their educational
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20 expectations (Chang, Greenberger, Chen, Heckhausen, & Farruggia, 2010), employed
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22 (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005b; McDonald, Erickson, Johnson, & Elder, 2007) and progressing
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24 in their careers (McDonald et al., 2007). Trusted adults are also linked to better physical and
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26 mental health among young people (Chang et al., 2010; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005a, 2005b;
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28 Greenberger, Chen, & Beam, 1998), fewer risky behaviours (Chang et al., 2010; DuBois &
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30 Silverthorn, 2005a, 2005b; Greenberger et al., 1998) and higher self-esteem (DuBois &
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32 Silverthorn, 2005b), trust (Liang et al., 2008) and resilience (Rhodes, 1994). These outcomes
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34 suggest that trusted adults can have a beneficial impact on young people's education and
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36 employment, as well as on their wellbeing, at a time when young people are making
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38 formative social and economic decisions and taking on new adult experiences.
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46 The literature thus demonstrates the importance of trusted adult relationships. What is less
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48 well understood is *how* and *why* trusted adults have such an impact. What is it about their
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50 support that is so influential? What enables them to guide young people at a time when
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52 young people are moving away from other adults, such as parents? These questions have
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54 often been explored in a formal mentoring context, for example, identifying that formal
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56 mentors enact relationships by establishing mutuality, trust and empathy with young
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3 people, through an extended and structured commitment (Rhodes, 2005; Rhodes & DuBois,
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5 2008) and drawing on guidance (Sipe, 2002). Formal mentors facilitate change in young
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7 people's lives (Dallos & Comley-Ross, 2005; De Anda, 2001) and do this in a manner that is a
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9 hybrid of vertical and horizontal relations, especially compared to the vertical parent-child
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11 relationship (Keller & Pryce, 2010).
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16 Some of these insights about how and why formal mentors are influential may apply to
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18 trusted adults. However, overall these questions have been under-explored for the more
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20 informal trusted adult relationship. In part, this is because much of the research about
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22 trusted adults is quantitative, with little capacity to access subjective experiences or
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24 perceptions. Where qualitative research has occurred, it has been about the role of trusted
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26 adults with young people who are in foster care or homeless – that is, young people who
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28 are particularly vulnerable. These studies have generated insights about how and why
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30 trusted adults are influential, such as for keeping young people “on track” (Munson,
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32 Smalling, Spencer, Scott, & Tracy, 2010), providing important advice, warnings and options
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34 about future endeavours (Ahrens et al., 2011), being direct (Munson et al., 2010:531) and
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36 giving useful forms of social and practical support (Dang & Miller, 2013). However, there is a
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38 need to know more about how and why trusted adults are influential for young people in a
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40 broader range of circumstances, beyond only these particularly vulnerable groups.
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48 This article begins this enquiry. It draws from the accounts of 70 young people to explore
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50 how and why trusted adults are important to young people experiencing different levels of
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52 economic engagement – a) engaged in education/employment, b) at risk of disengaging and
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54 c) disengaged. In examining how and why trusted adults are influential for these groups, the
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56 article investigates young people's perceptions, how trusted adults talk to young people and
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3 the types of help they offer. The article paints a new qualitative picture of how and why a
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5 range of young people draw on the support of, and value their relationships with, trusted
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7 adults.
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10 11 **2. Methodology** 12 13

14 This article draws on an Australian Research Council Linkage Project entitled '*We can't*
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16 *afford not to: Supporting young people within their families and communities from early*
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18 *adolescence to early adulthood*'. The project aims to provide a new understanding of how
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20 young people in a range of circumstances negotiate social and economic engagement as
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22 they move through early adolescence to early adulthood. The study interviewed young
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24 people aged 12-20 from six Australian communities (two urban, two regional, two rural)
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26 and, where young people consented, a parent and/or trusted adult once a year for three
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28 years. This article uses data from the interviews with the 70 young people in the first wave
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30 of the study (October 2012 - January 2013), although a total of 103 young people
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32 participated in between one and three interviews across the three years of the research. All
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34 participation was ethically approved, voluntary and recompensed.
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41 Young people participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews and a short
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43 demographic survey. They were asked about their perceptions of and participation in
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45 education, paid and unpaid work, community and their activities and interests outside of
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47 school and work, as well as relationships with family and friends. They were not asked
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49 directly in their interview whether they had a trusted adult. However, the concept emerged
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51 when the researcher asked permission to interview a trusted adult. This strategy ensured
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3 data about trusted adults was only collected when young people mentioned them
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5 independently.
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9 The interviews were transcribed and thematically coded using NVivo 10, with a coding
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11 framework focused on social and economic engagement and health, wellbeing and identity
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13 characteristics, such as in/dependence, agency, self-esteem and confidence. Information
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15 about trusted adults was coded according to who young people spend time with, how and
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17 why these adults help and what the impact of the relationship is on young people.
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20 21 2.1. Sample 22 23

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25 Seventy young people participated in the first wave of the study. This group was 47.1%
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27 (n=33) female and 52.9% (n=37) male. The age range was 12-20 (mean 16.37 years). Cultural
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29 and linguistic diversity was achieved, with 17.1% (n=12) from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait
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31 Islander background, 17.1% (n=12) born in a country other than Australia and 18.6% (n=13)
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33 who spoke a language other than English at home.
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37 The presence of trusted adults was qualitatively assessed. Young people were considered to
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39 have a trusted adult when they either explicitly said an adult other than their parents was
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41 important to them or when they noted an adult other than their parents acting supportively
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43 towards them. Of the 70 young people, 68.6% (n=48) spoke about a trusted adult. The
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45 trusted adults included extended family (uncles, aunts, older cousins), older friends (parents
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47 of peers, family friends), community members (coaches, volunteer youth leaders) and
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49 people in paid roles (teachers, youth workers; Table 1).
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55 **[TABLE 1 HERE]**
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3 The sampling aimed to hear from young people in a variety of engagement circumstances,
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5 but especially to explore the experiences of those who were disengaged or at-risk in
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7 comparison to their peers. As such, while recruiting for young people with a variety of
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9 characteristics, there was over-sampling for those who were disengaged or at-risk by
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11 recruiting through programs known to include young people who had difficult experiences
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13 in education or of finding work. Of the 70 participants, 61.4% (n=43) were engaged full-time,
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15 15.7% (n=11) part-time and 22.9% (n=16) were disengaged from education and work. Of the
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17 70, 32.9% (n=23) were considered at risk of dropping out, 44.3% (n=31) not at-risk and
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19 22.9% (n=16) had already dropped out.
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25 Risk was determined using a system of interconnected measures: direct (young person said
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27 they had plans to drop out), partial (factors within education/employment that could
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29 influence a young person to drop out, e.g. struggling with schoolwork) and indirect (risk
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31 factors outside education/employment that together with other factors could influence a
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33 young person to drop out, e.g. family instability). Protective factors were also accounted for.
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36 The research team assigned measures for each young person, with checks to ensure inter-
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38 coder consistency. Young people were then classified as at-risk if they had: (1) one or more
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40 direct measures or (2) at least one partial measure *and* indirect measure(s), taking account
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42 of whether the type, number and extent of the protective factors could be considered to
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44 mitigate the risk factors. Some young people were also classified as at-risk if they had
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46 finished school, were not yet engaged in further education/employment *and* had no plans
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48 to start further education/employment. This was necessary as the interviews were
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50 conducted just as the school year had finished and some young people were in transition.
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3 Regardless of their engagement/risk status, approximately two-thirds or more of the young
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5 people reported having a trusted adult (Table 2). Young people who were at-risk or
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7 disengaged were more likely to report having a trusted adult than engaged young people.
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10 This may be because the former were more likely to be directly in contact with a larger
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12 number of adults in paid service roles than their engaged peers. Table 3 shows the higher
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14 proportion of at-risk and disengaged young people with paid trusted adults compared to
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16 engaged young people (58.8% and 45.5% cf. 35%). This finding may also reflect a greater
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18 need for trusted adult relationships amongst young people who are at-risk or disengaged
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20 and/or a higher reliance by engaged young people on their parents.
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25 **[TABLE 2 HERE]**
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31 As the groups were small when categorised by engagement/risk, this article does not further
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33 disaggregate the sample by other demographic characteristics, such as gender, age, cultural
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35 background or geographic location. Despite this limitation, the 48 young people who
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37 reported having relationships with trusted adults provide an opportunity to understand
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39 more about how and why trusted adults are important to young people in different
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41 economic circumstances.
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45 46 **3. Findings** 47

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50 In examining how and why trusted adults are influential for young people at a time when
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52 they are often moving away from other adults, the article details three insights. The first
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54 two apply to young people regardless of engagement/risk status. The first is about the
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56 manner with which trusted adults talk with young people and how and why trusted adults
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3 get through to them. The second is about what trusted adults offer and how and why their
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5 support is perceived as beneficial. The final insight is about how trusted adults' practical
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7 assistance varies according to young people's engagement/risk status.
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10 11 **3.1. Talking not telling** 12

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14 Across different engagement/risk statuses, the young people reported that trusted adults
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16 *talked with* them rather than *telling* them what to do. This *talking not telling* involved low-
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18 key and direct conversations, enacted with equity.
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22 Regardless of engagement/risk status, the young people described a low-key tone to their
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24 conversations with trusted adults. A young woman in full-time education explained that
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26 “[that teacher’s] the one that I can talk to like a mate”, while a young man at risk of
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28 dropping out of alternative education commented that he and his friend’s mother just “sit
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30 down and chat”. Another young man who was back in alternative education after dropping
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32 out of school due to crime commented that he “just kick[s] back in the carport and just sit[s]
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34 there and talk[s]” with his older cousins who he sees as role models because they stayed in
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36 school and went to church.
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42 Similarly, young people in different engagement/risk circumstances emphasised that the
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44 conversations were voluntary. A young woman in full-time education explained that her
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46 favourite teacher “doesn’t pressure you into telling her stuff”, while another who was
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48 disengaged highlighted that her youth group leader is “just one of those people you can talk
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50 to about anything really”.
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55 Young people across different engagement/risk circumstances were not worried about
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57 confidentiality or judgement with trusted adults. A young woman in full-time education
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3 commented that her youth group leader had told her “I promise I won’t judge you”. Another
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5 who was back in part-time education after dropping out, but at risk of dropping out again
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7 due to housing instability, commented that the guidance counsellor she particularly trusts
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9 had “kept it all, like, confidential”. For another who had difficult relationships with her
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11 parents and had spent time out of education, it was the lack of judgement from her aunts
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13 that made her feel valued: “They don’t care about what happened, how it happened or why
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15 – they care about helping me and making sure I’m okay”.

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20 The young people also described trusted adults as honest and direct. A young woman in full-
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22 time education commented that when “I’m upset” the teacher she trusts “will ask”. Another
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24 valued that their trusted adult was “really understanding” but also “didn’t sugar-coat
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26 things”. These young people appreciate that their trusted adults do not try to shield them
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28 from problems or consequences and that they provide direct guidance.
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33 Importantly, young people also emphasised that their conversations with trusted adults
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35 were enacted with equity. They described a relationship that *felt* non-hierarchical, even
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37 though the trusted adult was older and potentially in a position of power over them. The
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39 feeling of equity was drawn from the attitude the adults brought to the relationship. For
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41 example, one young woman in full-time education commented that the teacher she trusts
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43 “treats me like a normal person, like doesn’t [say]... ‘You’re younger than me, that means
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45 I’m not going to treat you like I treat the others’”, while another commented that it was a
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47 dynamic of “Even though I might be your coach, I’m still your friend”. The conversations
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49 thus contain a feeling of being equal to the adult, even though young people are still
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51 receiving support and guidance.
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3 For understanding how and why trusted adults are influential at a time when young people
4 are moving away from other adults, these low-key, direct and equitable conversations may
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6 are moving away from other adults, these low-key, direct and equitable conversations may
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8 provide part of the answer. While it may not be universal, the experience of *talking not*
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10 *telling* means that young people can seek the guidance they need for progressing through
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12 new formative life decisions, but this does not have to come at the expense of feeling like a
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14 child *or* of not getting the support they need. Instead, the manner in which trusted adults
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16 talk is particularly suited to young people’s stage of development; it allows young people to
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18 feel like an equal adult, even if they are still objectively being guided towards adulthood.
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23 **3.2. Support, encouragement and role modelling**

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26 Across different engagement/risk circumstances, the young people also spoke about how
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28 trusted adults offer them the support, encouragement and role modelling needed as they
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30 move towards adulthood.
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34 The support often related to common experiences young people face, for example, in
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36 education. A young man at risk of dropping out of alternative education because he was
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38 fighting with his peers commented that when he was talking with his trusted adult, his
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40 friend’s mum, she would say, “‘Yeah, they are an idiot’ – agrees with me” and “that makes
41
42 me feel better”. Another young woman in full-time education who lacked confidence in her
43
44 academic abilities commented on the emotional support she received from her trusted
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46 adult: “[That teacher] will bring my confidence back up and I’ll feel that I can do whatever
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48 she just said I could do and, like, achieve it”. In each example, young people receive support
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50 and encouragement that relates to their engagement in education and that contributes to
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52 them feeling better about themselves in that setting.
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3 Other young people emphasised that trusted adults provided a role model. A young man
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5 who struggled academically in his full-time studies, but enjoyed archery, commented on the
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7 role of the older people in his archery club:
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11 There's older people in [the archery club] who are good role models... it's a
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13 really good thing for younger people to learn from older people how to
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15 behave socially... most of them help you and offer advice and help coach
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17 you if you're having problems.
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21 Another young man from an Indigenous background who had dropped out of school but
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23 successfully entered full-time work spoke about the role of his football coach in modelling
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25 the attitude he brought to employment:
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29 My footy coach, I've spent a lot of time with him... I grew up with a single
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31 mother and so he was like a father-figure in my life. So I felt pretty
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33 confident, I knew what I was doing and I said [to the potential employer],
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35 "Yeah, I want to do what you're doing, I want to help people... I've had a
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37 bit of support growing up and I want to give it back to people".
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42 In each case, as the young person moves towards adult roles and/or changed economic
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44 engagement, their trusted adults provide examples of decision-making and behaviour. The
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46 support, encouragement and role modelling that trusted adults offer are developmentally
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48 significant at a time when young people broach new experiences.
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3.3. Practical assistance varies by young people's engagement/risk status

This article has so far identified characteristics of the trusted adult relationship that occur irrespective of young people's engagement/risk status. However, there were some differences in the roles trusted adults played based on young people's level of engagement/risk, mainly in the area of the assistance they offered.

Many young people described trusted adults providing practical assistance to them, such as coaching or tutoring, assistance with resources and helping them out of difficult situations. Trusted adults delivered this support in their characteristic low-key, direct and equitable manner. However, the extensiveness and impact of the practical assistance varied according to young people's engagement/risk status, as detailed below.

3.3.1. Young people engaged in education/employment

For the young people who were engaged full-time in education or employment, with no risk of dropping out, the practical assistance provided by trusted adults typically had an augmentative character.

Often this meant that trusted adults provided extra support to engaged young people in areas they were already supported in by others, such as participating in their communities or education. For example, a young woman in a community soccer team noted, "My uncle has been helping me with soccer too – he's given me a lot of tips". Here her trusted adult provides extra support beyond what the soccer team provides. Another young man in full-time education commented, "I had a mentor when I first came to Australia and then later

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3 another guy... He helps me with hard subjects like maths". The practical assistance helps the
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5 young person alongside the school he attends.
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9 Whilst remaining augmentative, in certain circumstances, such as during key transitions, the
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11 practical assistance provided to engaged young people took on particular importance. One
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13 young woman who was soon to leave school explained that her brother-in-law helped her
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15 decide what to do next: "I always talk about the Army and [my brother-in-law's] helping me
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17 trying to get into that or giving me other options like go to TAFE, be a personal trainer and
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19 stuff like that". Another young person explained how his trusted adult, a teacher, helped
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21 him transition from school to work: "I asked one of my teachers about getting a job and she
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23 picked up the phone and called a friend and I got a job through her". For this young person,
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25 who had come to Australia as a refugee with few family networks, the teacher's assistance
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27 may have been vital in keeping him engaged in the absence of other supports. For both
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29 young people, the assistance offered was low-key, direct and augmentative – discussing
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31 future options or calling a friend – yet because of the serious nature of these young people's
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33 transitions, it was particularly important.
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40 The augmentative assistance also became particularly important during times of crisis that
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42 had the potential to distract engaged young people from their studies. One young woman
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44 described the support she received from her school chaplain:
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48 My school chaplain was always supportive of me... my mum had cervical
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50 cancer... [The chaplain] was talking to us about it because Mum didn't
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52 know how to explain it to us.
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3 Similarly, another young person commented on how her trusted adult, a teacher, provided
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5 assistance when her mental health problems were beginning to interfere with her studies:
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9 A teacher... sat down and just worked things out with us... took some more
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11 steps to devise a study plan... So we found out this is what we have to do,
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13 this is how you can get there, there's no need to worry about things
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15 anymore.
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19 In each case, the assistance is particularly significant because of the potential of the
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21 situation to adversely impact on the young person's education.
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25 Thus, trusted adults often offered practical assistance to engaged young people. Sometimes
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27 this was alongside the young people's other supports. Yet at times of transition or crisis, this
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29 assistance could be important in keeping engaged young people in education.
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32 33 **3.3.2. Young people at-risk or disengaged from education/employment** 34

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36 While also characteristically low-key, direct and equitable, the practical assistance of trusted
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38 adults to young people who were at-risk or disengaged from education/employment was
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40 often more extensive and oriented at addressing their engagement problems.
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44 Some trusted adults provided assistance that addressed underlying issues that led to young
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46 people's disengagement. One young man who was in full-time education but planned to
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48 drop out, partially due to a history of criminal activity and long suspensions from school,
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50 described the direct manner in which his trusted adult, a youth worker, spoke to him to
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52 make him stop stealing: "If I like steal or stuff [the youth worker] tells me, 'Oh, don't come
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54 back to this youth [centre]'. He makes me stop stealing and shit". Another young woman
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3 who had dropped out of school partly due to family instability and being kicked out of home
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5 commented on practical assistance from family friends:
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9 I've known these [family friends] since I was like four-years-old, so they've
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11 always given me a place to stay if I've nowhere to stay. They always... help
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13 me out if I ever get kicked out, if I need money or anything, food or just
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15 somewhere to have a shower.
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19 One young Indigenous woman, who had been at risk of dropping out of school due to family
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21 instability and poverty, described the role that her trusted adults, the Indigenous support
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23 staff at her school, had in keeping her engaged through Year 12:
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27 I couldn't pay for my school fees and then they sat me down one
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29 afternoon and we had a meeting... I made a deal with them... I'll give my
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31 phone to him so I'll actually get my work done and I did my part of it and
32
33 then they were like "We'll pay for your school fees".
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38 The deal included the young woman studying with the trusted adults during free-periods
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40 and, in return, them buying her a dress for the school formal – an event she wanted to
41
42 attend, but could not afford to – if she completed Year 12. Through financial assistance and
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44 incentive, but also expecting responsibility from her (relinquishing her phone and requiring
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46 her to concentrate and study), the trusted adults offered the assistance necessary to both
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48 keep her in school *and* give her agency.
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53 In each case, trusted adults play a role in addressing underlying issues that put young people
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55 at risk of disengagement. While they may not always succeed in keeping young people in
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3 education as they did in the two examples above, there is significant potential for trusted
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5 adults to support young people's economic outcomes.
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9 Other trusted adults' assistance had a direct role in getting young people back into
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11 education. One young woman had dropped out of school because of difficult relationships
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13 with her parents and step-father and subsequent homelessness. She eventually moved
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15 inter-state to live with her aunt who "paid for my everything" and put in extensive effort to
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17 get her back into school:
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21 My aunt, she's real strong, she pushed me to go to school so much... She
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23 researched every single school... and found the best state school... and she
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25 enrolled me there, she sorted everything out there, she did interviews and
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27 her best to make sure I had the best education that I could.
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32 Similarly, another young man who had dropped out of school due to crime and involvement
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34 in a drinking culture in his local area spoke about two trusted adults who got him back into
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36 education:
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40 [My older friend] helped me to get back into school... he's like... "Go see
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42 that police officer". And I go, "Why?" and he's like, "Just go bro. You'll get
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44 education or something, go get a job or something, I'm sick of seeing you
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46 around here... just sitting... just go". So I went... [The officer] helped me
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48 get back into school... He was like, "Do you want to go to a mainstream or
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50 like a normal high school or...?" I was thinking, "Oh, I don't think I can do
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52 that". And then he's like, "Don't worry, I've got a school for you" and [he]
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54 made the interview [and] took me.
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3 In both cases, the trusted adult paid attention to school suitability, found a match and
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5 helped convince the young person that it was the right choice. The practical assistance
6
7 offered was much more extensive than for engaged young people and it had an important
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9 role in reversing each young person's disengagement and thus influencing their future
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11 trajectories.
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14 15 16 **4. Discussion and conclusion** 17

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19 This article sought to understand what enables trusted adults to guide young people's social
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21 and economic engagement at a time when young people are moving away from other
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23 adults, such as parents. It found that the trusted adults in this study have a characteristic
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25 way of *talking not telling*, which means they provide the support, encouragement and role
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27 modelling that young people need as they move towards adulthood in a low-key, direct and
28
29 equitable or non-hierarchical way. Other studies have also highlighted a down-to-earth and
30
31 respectful manner where trusted adults do not "beat around the bush" (Ahrens et al., 2011;
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33 Munson et al., 2010:531) and that trusted adults provide emotional, developmental and
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35 practical assistance (Beam et al., 2002; Liang et al., 2008). This article adds the
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37 understanding that this low-key, direct and equitable manner is particularly appropriate to
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39 young people's stage of development, where they need guidance, but wish to receive it in a
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41 way where they can feel like they are also progressing into adulthood (Aquilino, 2006).
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49 Further, the article sought to understand the difference in trusted adults' role according to
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51 young people's engagement/risk status in education and employment. It found that *talking*
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53 *not telling* and support, encouragement and role modelling are characteristic regardless of
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55 young people's engagement/risk status. The type of practical assistance trusted adults
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3 offered, however, differed. While their practical assistance is augmentative with engaged
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5 young people, it can play a more extensive role in trying to address and/or reverse other
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7 young people's disengagement. That is, where the need is higher, trusted adults have more
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9 influence on young people's circumstances and future trajectories. This insight gives a new
10
11 picture of how the consequences of the relationship vary by young people's level of
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13 engagement/risk. It suggests that, while potentially important for all young people, trusted
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15 adult relationships have a particularly important role for young people who are at risk of
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17 disengagement or already disengaged and who lack other supports. For these young people,
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19 the relationship holds the potential to reach them when other people cannot and thus to be
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21 transformative in their life experiences.
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27 The findings from this study need to be contextualised within the range of relationships
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29 available to young people, as parents and formal mentors may also enact some of the same
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31 characteristics as trusted adults. The important finding from this study is that trusted adults
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33 can be particularly well-placed to provide support to young people, which may be critically
34
35 important when young people's parents are unavailable or unable to play a key role or
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37 when young people are withdrawing from parental support and are not connected to formal
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39 mentors. There is however scope to learn more about the three-way systems of support
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41 that are enacted between young people, trusted adults and parents and between young
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43 people, trusted adults and formal mentors. In particular, there is a need to know more
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45 about whether it is simply that trusted adults step in at a time when young people would
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47 prefer not to go to parents or whether young people's relationships with trusted adults are
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49 actually constructed *against* those with their parents, where young people seek qualities
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51 and interactions from trusted adults that they believe are different from their parents. This
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3 is an area that should be explored in future studies to better place trusted adults within the
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5 scope of relationships available to young people.
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9 The insights about trusted adults in this article imply that it is important for young people to
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11 have strong networks. Where young people can meet and develop relationships with many
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13 trusted adults, they will have more sources of developmentally-appropriate support. While
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15 trusted adult relationships cannot be manufactured, from a policy perspective conditions
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17 could be enabled or created to help facilitate trusting relationships between young people
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19 and adults. While this may sometimes occur via formal mentoring, trusted adult
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21 relationships could also be supported through fostering community structures where young
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23 people can meet and get to know adults from different parts of the community or by
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25 supporting the adults who surround young people to implement the low-key, direct and
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27 equitable communication that young people value.
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33 A significant finding of this study is that paid professionals can become trusted adults. Many
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35 young people in this study – especially those who were at-risk or disengaged – spoke about
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37 relationships with trusted adults in a paid role, such as a teacher or youth worker. In these
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39 paid situations, there is a greater likelihood of trusted adult relationships ending either
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41 when young people age out of the institutions that have connected them to the adults or
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43 when there is staff turnover. However, paid trusted adults may also have a more vital role
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45 with disengaged or at-risk young people, who may lack other supports or face much more
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47 serious disadvantage if they do not receive adequate support or have support revoked
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49 prematurely. There is thus a need to pay attention to the institutional context of paid
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51 trusted adults. Future research should explore what happens when these relationships end,
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53 particularly when this happens abruptly in an institutional context. There is a need to know
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3 more about the implications for young people and about how this change can be effectively
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5 managed.
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9 While offering important insights, this article has some limitations. First, the sample is not
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11 representative and because it is small, it is not broken down by gender, age, culture or
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13 geography. A larger study would be needed to investigate these factors. Second, the article
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15 does not differentiate between young people who identified one or numerous trusted
16
17 adults. Further, the article only captures the relationship at one point in time. A longitudinal
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19 exploration could examine the building or breakdown of trust that may emerge over time.
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21 Finally, this article does not draw on the perspectives of trusted adults. Future research
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23 should develop knowledge of how the relationship is experienced by both young people and
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25 trusted adults.
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Table 1: Trusted adults by category

Category of trusted adult	Per cent*	Total n=48
Extended family	56.3	27
Older friend	16.7	8
Person in a paid role	45.8	22
Community member	12.5	6
Other	4.2	2

* Young people could list more than one trusted adult; categories do not equal 100%.

Table 2: Trusted adults by young people's engagement/risk status

	No trusted adult mentioned	Has a trusted adult
Engaged	35.5% (11)	64.5% (20)
At-risk	26.1% (6)	73.9% (17)
Disengaged	31.3% (5)	68.8% (11)
Total	31.4% (22)	68.6% (48)

Table 3: Category of trusted adult by young people's engagement/risk status

	Engaged (total n=20)	At-risk (total n=17)	Disengaged (total n=11)
Extended family	55.0% (n=11)	52.9% (n=9)	63.6% (n=7)
Older friend	20.0% (n=4)	11.8% (n=2)	18.2% (n=2)
Person in paid role	35% (n=7)	58.8% (n=10)	45.5% (n=5)
Community member	25% (n=5)	0% (n=0)	9.1% (n=1)
Other	0% (n=0)	11.8% (n=2)	0% (n=0)

* Young people could list more than one trusted adult; categories do not equal 100%.