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OUR VOICES

Navigating Rough Waters
Support Networks for Youth

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AIM: To identify patterns of support young people turn to in challenging times, using youth voice data collected from the *Tō Mātou Rerenga - Our Journey* app.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

- **There are a range of challenges that young people experience, with the transition to high school being particularly significant for many 13-year-olds in Aotearoa.**
- **Social support is critical and can be provided by different members of the community.**
- **There are gender differences in the coping strategies that rangatahi utilise, but we found no differences by ethnic group.**

What do we know?

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by emotional, social and academic challenges. In Aotearoa, more than half of the population report experiencing one or more Adverse Childhood Experiences before the age of 18 [1]. This statistic rises to 83% among 8-year-olds from the Growing Up in New Zealand cohort [2]. Help-seeking behaviours and coping strategies can enable rangatahi to navigate tough times in healthy ways. Common strategies include trying to fix the problem, regulating emotions, reframing the situation, religious coping and seeking social support [3].

What can we learn?

Research has shown that how young people cope with tough times is influenced by a range of factors, yet much of the existing literature relies on adult perceptions or structured survey responses [4]. Understanding the types of support rangatahi draw on using youth voice can help schools, families, and communities provide more targeted resources. Prior research highlights the importance of family and peer relationships but less is known about the relative role of non-relational support mechanisms, such as the use of comfort items [5]. Furthermore, while gender and cultural background may influence coping approaches, evidence in this area is lacking [6].

ABOUT OUR VOICES The Our Voices project aims to better understand the diverse and complex journey our young people experience growing up in Aotearoa to inform policy and services targeted to supporting their wellbeing. *Tō Mātou Rerenga - Our Journey* is an app co-designed with young people to share their lived experiences and resulted in the collection of rich qualitative multi-modal information from almost 1,000 13-year-olds participating in the *Growing Up in New Zealand* longitudinal study. The collaborative research programme uses innovative research methods and policy partnerships to help shape the future for generations to come. The project was funded by the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment and involves a multidisciplinary team of national and international experts. For more information visit https://ourvoices.auckland.ac.nz/.

WHAT CHALLENGES ARE YOUNG PEOPLE NAVIGATING TODAY?

There are a range of challenges that young people reported navigating in the past year. Perhaps most succinctly, one young person noted that the biggest challenge that they had faced was "being a teenager". The main categories of challenges faced by rangatahi generally reflect the developmental context of adolescence.

School

Most students transition to high school when they are 13-years old. The significance of this transition was reflected in the responses that referred to various aspects of school life, including the 'newness' of the people and environment.

"Challenge of a new bigger school and not knowing anyone."

Rangatahi discussed the stress associated with the increased workload of homework and studying in preparation for exams. Young people worry about getting good grades and meeting the expectations of their teachers.

"It was hard to study and sit tests."

The social context of high school was another challenge navigated by some young people, including trying to fit in, leaving old friends and making new ones, and managing "friend drama."

Characteristics and interests

The increased level of independence and responsibility associated with adolescence was highlighted by responses that referred to managing levels of *motivation*, *procrastination*, *insecurity* and *self-acceptance*.

These characteristics help to shape young people's identities. Finding one's identity was also noted as a challenge, as was engaging in interests, such as competitive sport, which provide opportunities to extend oneself.

Family

Young people demonstrated an awareness of the importance of family. The value of these relationships was highlighted in two ways. Young people discussed the challenge of:

1. Seeing family members who were sick, or dealing with the loss of a family member.
2. Managing tricky relationships with parents, or observing relationships break down.

Health

Physical and mental health issues were noted as challenges that impacted on young people's day-to-day life. Physical ailments often meant that young people could not physically participate in everyday activities, such as attending school. Mental health challenges included living with anxiety, sadness and tiredness. Some young people talked to a psychologist and found that this support was helpful.

While most of the challenges fell under these four categories, some responses did not. In particular, some rangatahi felt that they did not face any challenges, while others listed "everything" as their challenge. Some young people did not know what their biggest challenges were. This indicates that rangatahi vary in the nature and frequency of the challenges they experience.

SOCIAL SUPPORT IS KEY

Nearly three quarters of young people described relying on relationships during tough times. Within this theme, two key sources of support were discussed: 1) Family and whānau, and 2) Friends, mentors and parasocial connections (one-sided emotional connections that individuals form with celebrities).

Family and whānau

Mothers and fathers, were frequently mentioned as sources of *comfort*, *advice* and *reassurance*. In describing how their parents help them, young people demonstrated a deep appreciation for these relationships.

"My mum is always there for me to talk to when I am worrying... it's a nice feeling when she says, 'It's ok.'"

"My family especially my dad."

"My best friend is always such a good help, She's been through everything with me... I couldn't have made it this far without her."

The theme of social support highlights the significant role of close relationships in supporting young people's emotional wellbeing during challenging times.

This support can be provided by a range of people within the community.

Friends, mentors and parasocial connections

Parasocial relationships are **socio-emotional connections that people develop with media figures such as celebrities or fictional characters**[7]. Facilitated by social media, these connections can feel like 'real-life' relationships but are not reciprocated. Nonetheless, they can provide a sense of support for young people.

Friends also played a vital role in supporting young people, with participants describing them as trustworthy confidants who understood their struggles.

"Billie Eilish's [musician] music. She understands me. She's never met me yet she voices my feelings so well."

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THE USE OF DISTRACTION AND ESCAPISM AS A COPING STRATEGY

Distraction and escapism emerged as another common theme related to help-seeking behaviours, with a quarter of participants describing activities that helped them shift focus away from stress. Young people reported turning to *entertainment media*, *music*, *reading* and *hobbies* to manage difficult emotions.

For many rangatahi, distraction is not avoidance but an active strategy for emotional regulation, providing temporary relief and space to process difficult situations. This can help inform how educators and caregivers support healthy, constructive escapism for youth.
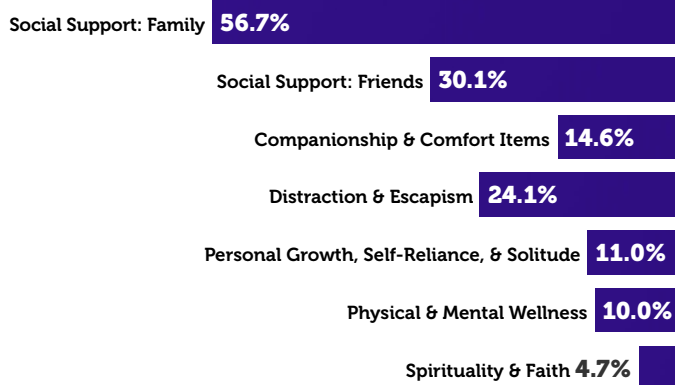
"Stirniolo triplets [social media influencers] 'cause they never fail to make me laugh."

"Reading... because I'm not 'there' anymore."

"Music helps me get through tough times because I can relax and calm down while listening."

Social Support: Family **56.7%**
Social Support: Friends **30.1%**
Companionship & Comfort Items **14.6%**
Distraction & Escapism **24.1%**
Personal Growth, Self-Reliance, & Solitude **11.0%**
Physical & Mental Wellness **10.0%**
Spirituality & Faith **4.7%**

Percentages add to more than 100% as participant responses could be coded as multiple themes.

Young people employ a range of coping strategies to overcome challenges

Although social support and escapism and distraction were the most common coping strategies that young people turned to in challenging times, there were a range of other strategies utilised. Most young people listed more than one coping strategy, suggesting that they might employ different strategies in different situations or depending on the resources available to them. These strategies also offer different ways of approaching challenges. This variation in strategies used indicates that young people in Aotearoa have a degree of flexibility in how they get through tough times.

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DEMOGRAPHIC PATTERNS OF COPING

There are clear differences between females and males in how they cope with tough times. Females were more likely to mention friends and comforting things (e.g., blanket) as ways they got through tough times. For males, this might mean that adults and peers need to help create more chances or encouragement to talk about what helps them feel supported too, even if they don't always express it the same way.

Genders derived based on sex assigned at birth.

"Sometimes I distract myself by doing a project or dancing."

"My friends help me to get through times that are tough the most, because they listen, they understand, and help me out if I need it."

"Hugging my Dora blanket… just makes me feel safe."

Coping patterns were similar across different ethnic groups. This suggests that, while individual preferences vary, young people in Aotearoa share common ways of managing difficulties. This reinforces the importance of fostering positive peer relationships, supporting healthy distraction activities, and recognising the power of simple comfort items for all rangatahi.

CONCLUSION

Young people are likely to encounter challenges. Some of these challenges will be experienced by choice, like playing competitive sport, but most of the time rangatahi will navigate their way through tough times out of necessity. Social support, particularly from family and friends, and the use of comfort items and healthy forms of distraction are key coping strategies that young people employ to overcome challenges.

The consistency of coping patterns across ethnic groups suggests that while culturally responsive support remains essential, there are common developmental needs that can be addressed in universal wellbeing initiatives. For policy and practice, these findings reinforce the importance of fostering strong peer connections and ensuring young people have safe, trusted adults to turn to in schools and communities.

Additionally, encouraging creative, physical, and leisure activities can support emotional regulation and resilience. Programmes that promote positive friendships, safe school environments, and opportunities for self-expression will help meet the natural coping preferences of rangatahi, contributing to stronger emotional wellbeing for young people across diverse backgrounds in Aotearoa.

OUR VOICES SUMMER SNAPSHOT SERIES
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APPENDIX

App questions used:

Who or what helps you get through tough times?

How do they help?

What have been the biggest challenges of this year so far for you?

What has made them challenging?

Method of data analysis:

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative (text) data [8,9]. Researchers developed themes that represented patterns of meaning that centred on a key idea or concept. A theme offered a rich description of the experiences or perspectives shared by participants. Braun and Clarke [8] outline a six-step process for reflexive thematic analysis but note that this type of research is iterative in nature.

A key component of reflexive thematic analysis is that the researcher is valued as an important and integrated part of the research process. This means that different researchers may develop different themes and reflects the complexity and richness of both researchers' and participants' lived realities.

Content analysis was used to analyse qualitative (text) data [10]. Researchers developed categories that were used to summarise the content. These categories were often based on how often codes were present in the dataset. Content analysis uses a structured approach in which a codebook is developed based on consensus between researchers. This allows multiple coders to apply codes to data in a systematic way and reduce researcher bias.

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This report is part of the *Our Voices Summer Snapshot Series*. These reports focus on youth understandings and lived experiences of wellbeing in Aotearoa, including school experiences and social support.

Visit https://ourvoices.auckland.ac.nz/ for more information or contact us at ourvoices@auckland.ac.nz.

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