Building Resilience in Young People

Mental Health Prevention That Works

Based on the World Youth Report 2025
Insights from 3,000 youth across 137 countries

Dalgarno Institute

Minimising Harm by Maximising Prevention

The Scale of the Challenge

One in seven young people aged 10 to 19 experiences a mental health condition. That's millions navigating anxiety, depression, and other challenges whilst trying to figure out life.

The World Youth Report 2025, based on consultations with nearly 3,000 youth from 137 countries, examines how to support young people in building resilience through prevention, support systems, and evidence-based interventions.

This isn't another lecture about being 'tough' or 'resilient'. It's about the real factors shaping mental health outcomes, from substance use to economic pressures, and creating systems that genuinely support us.

1 in 7 youth affected by mental health conditions	**75%** of adult conditions present by mid-twenties
43% of youth rated mental health as 'poor' or 'fair'	**40%** have family members with substance or mental health issues

How Substance Use Undermines Resilience

Substance use and mental health are deeply connected. Research shows this relationship goes both ways. Sometimes mental health struggles lead to substance use as a coping mechanism, and sometimes substance use triggers or worsens mental health conditions. Either way, it's a cycle that makes building resilience much harder and can follow us into adulthood if we don't address it early and properly.

> *Almost 40% of young people surveyed reported having family members who experienced difficulty managing emotions, suffered from mental health disorders, or used alcohol and other drugs.*

Essentially all seven Adverse Childhood Experiences can be the direct result of substance use, which is itself one of those terrible seven. Substance abuse during youth often co-occurs with mental health disorders, creating a cycle that's hard to break.

Studies across multiple countries – from Morocco to China to Mexico – show consistent links between adverse childhood experiences, substance use, and poor youth mental health outcomes. In China, drug use among students is twice as high as among the general adult population.

The impact extends beyond health. Substance use is linked to chronic school absence, affecting educational outcomes and future employment. For some young people, it becomes entangled with the criminal justice system, where punitive approaches often make mental health worse. Many youth in detention have untreated mental health conditions worsened by substance abuse.

With the adolescent brain still developing up to the mean age of 28 years, early substance use increases the risk of developing dependency and can result in lasting changes in brain function and emotional regulation.

These interconnected challenges make building resilience especially difficult without comprehensive support – support that goes beyond 'damage management' mantras and simplistic approaches to harm reduction.

Why Prevention Matters

Seventy-five per cent of all mental health conditions that adults experience were already present by their mid-twenties. This makes adolescence a critical window for building resilience and supporting long-term wellbeing.

Prevention isn't just about individual therapy or medication. Mental health emerges from complex interactions between biological, psychological, family, peer, community, and cultural influences. Building resilience requires prevention across all these levels.

BARRIERS TO SEEKING HELP
— Lack of trust in other people
— Not being taken seriously
— Fear of being a 'burden' to others

Only 40 per cent of surveyed youth had ever seen a doctor, nurse, or counsellor about their emotional or mental health. Of those who did seek help, 12 per cent had 11 or more visits in the preceding 12 months.

> *Schools play a massive role. Effective school-based programmes should include both resilience-building curriculum alongside substance use prevention that brings in parents, guardians, and peer groups.*

Prevention means recognising the connection between adverse childhood experiences, substance use, and mental health, and developing measures to address these dynamics before they escalate.

One-size-fits-all approaches do not often work. During crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, disruption to support systems led to increased rates of PTSD, anxiety, and psychological distress.

4× higher PTSD in quarantined children	40.4% of Chinese youth showed psychological problems

Beyond Individual Effort

Resilience isn't about pretending everything's fine or pushing through alone. It is about having the right scaffolding in place: sustainable and meaningful value systems, good quality education, access to decent employment, supportive families, caring communities and opportunities for community engagement.

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE TOLD US

38% reported they 'never' or 'rarely' woke up fresh and rested

44% were in regular contact with people detrimental to their wellbeing

30% 'never' talked about problems or feelings with a parent or carer

80% felt they belonged to a community at least once in the prior year

Research shows that youth is a 'second chance in the second decade' – a unique period where our brains are still developing, particularly in areas related to social relationships and emotional engagement. This sensitivity means the environments we're in matter, and that's why sustainable meaning and robust value systems are vital anchors.

The Social Determinants of Resilience

Building resilience requires addressing the social determinants that shape young people's lives. The evidence points to five interconnected pillars.

Education

Schools should prioritise social-emotional learning, provide mental health training for teachers, and create welcoming spaces for all students. In a study of 1,466 schools across 10 European countries, 40.3% didn't have a designated space for mental health support, 35.5% didn't provide group therapy, and 26.9% didn't offer mental health education.

Employment

Fair remuneration, inclusive workplaces, and support during the transition from education to employment all help build resilience. High job demands, low job control, effort-reward imbalance, and low work support are all associated with poor mental health among young workers.

Family & Relationships

Strong, supportive family relationships are protective. Building resilience also means having support when family situations are challenging – through parenting programmes, interventions to reduce family conflict, or support for parents with mental health conditions.

Economic Security

Poverty isn't just about lack of money – it's about reduced access to resources, opportunities, and support. Some young people go to school, work, or bed hungry. Research on cash transfer programmes in Kenya showed significant reductions in depressive symptoms among orphaned and vulnerable youth over four years.

Meaning & Values

Decision-making, choice, direction – agency and capacity – are built on far more than structural pillars alone. Sustainable meaning and robust proven values permeate all strong cultural and societal structures. These assets enable families and communities to build protective environments that can reshape and repair fractured environments – more so than mere money and programmes will ever do.

> *If best practice isn't sought and in place, then a lesser system will emerge and young people will subscribe to the dominant cultural voice in the absence of the best practice. Identifying and deploying these best practice principles must at least be in the offering to develop community wellbeing.*

A Better Way Forward

The World Resiliency Week Team advocates for evidence-based approaches that address root causes, not just symptoms. Five recommendations supported by the research:

1   **Comprehensive School-Based Approaches**

Integrate youth mental health support across the entire school environment with adequate funding for science-led mental health programmes, teacher training to identify warning signs, and culturally appropriate interventions. Young people should be co-collaborators, not just recipients.

2   **Holistic Rehabilitation Over Punitive Measures**

For young people caught up in substance use and the justice system, punitive approaches worsen outcomes. Holistic rehabilitation that addresses both mental health and substance use needs works better, emphasising recovery over punishment.

3   **Economic & Social Policy Integration**

Mental health can't be separated from economic and social conditions. Policies that promote fair income distribution, affordable housing, universal health coverage, and secure employment help young people build resilience.

4   **Crisis-Responsive Systems**

Public health crises, natural disasters, and large-scale disruptions affect every aspect of our lives. Effective responses require coordination across families, schools, workplaces, communities, and governments.

5   **Youth Voice & Leadership**

Policies work better when young people co-create the programmes designed to support them. The inclusion of youth in mental health policy processes drives changes in a collaborative, intergenerational manner.

The Bottom Line

Mental health isn't simply about individual willpower, though that is required in every endeavour. It is shaped by the environments we grow up in, the opportunities available to us, the support systems around us, the attitudes we adopt, the decisions we then make and the frameworks, values and policies that govern our societies.

Addressing substance use and mental health requires comprehensive systems of support that work across education, employment, family, economic policy, and community structures. It requires investing in programmes that work, not Band-Aid solutions that ignore root causes.

> *We deserve support that reflects our realities, respects our voices, and helps us build genuine resilience for the future.*

ONLINE SAFETY MATTERS TOO

Close to half of respondents reported that how they felt about themselves depended on what others thought of them online at least 'sometimes'. When it comes to cyberbullying, 75 per cent of youth had 'never' experienced it in the preceding 12 months, but 15 per cent had experienced it once or twice. Those identifying as gender 'other' were more likely to experience it, with around a third indicating they had been cyberbullied 'most days'.

Compiled by World Resiliency Day Team & Global Youth Resilience Council

Source: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs – World Youth Report 2025

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