

# ***‘With a little help from my friends’...The role of informal support systems and life skill development in enhancing successful transitions***

*Karin du Plessis, Ph.D, Incolink, & Tim Corney, Incolink<sup>1</sup>*

## **Abstract**

Many apprentices are in an important transitional phase as they move from school to work. If not negotiated successfully these transitions may be associated with increased risks for poor health and/or mental health outcomes. Apprentices’ personal life skills and the available support systems are important factors in assisting them to successfully negotiate these transitions and complete their apprenticeship. The focus of findings reported here are on construction industry apprentices. Blue-collar workers, such as those in the construction industry, comprise a significant proportion (32%) of the Australian working population. However, construction industry apprentices face high levels of attrition – with up to 40% of apprentices nationwide not completing their apprenticeships (Ball, 2004; BICCIAB, 2008). This has significant implications for apprentice retention in an industry where there are current and predicted future skill shortages (DEEWR, 2010).

## **Introduction<sup>2</sup>**

Construction industry apprentices undertake vocational training through a training institute and work for an employer who assists them in developing a range of skills. In turn the apprentice works for an employer for a set length of time at a training wage (Brooks, 2004). The majority of apprentices are young people who are in a period of transition from school to full time work. During this transitional period the young person begins to set vocational goals (Durkin, 1995). Young people also experience significant personal changes during this period as they find their feet in a new work role and take on more responsibilities. The young person’s self-concept may also still be changing, and he/she might shift from idealistic expectations around a chosen career to a more pragmatic orientation (Durkin, 1995). With regards to relational development, the young adult also increasingly practices emotional self-regulation (i.e., internal cognitive strategies) in an effort to become more autonomous and emotionally self-sufficient (Allen & Miga, 2010).

Young males can be particularly vulnerable during this transitional period. For example, as opposed to young women, young Australian men aged 15 - 24 years old are at increased risk for suicide (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2010). This is of particular concern in the building and construction industry, which is male-dominated, and where the suicide risk is deemed higher amongst this age group than the general population (Heller, Hawgood, & De

---

<sup>1</sup> Incolink is the trade name for Redundancy Payment Central Fund Limited. It is a trustee company established by employers and unions in the Victorian building and construction industry in 1989 to administer industry funds.

<sup>2</sup> Introduction is an excerpt from Du Plessis, K. & Corney, T. (2011). Trust, respect and friendship: The key attributes of significant others in the lives of young working men. *Youth Studies Australia*, 30:1.

Leo, 2007). In addition, due to gender-role socialisation many young men value the importance of being self-reliant and are often reluctant to seek help for health or mental health concerns (Du Plessis *et al.*, 2009) – a factor which place them at additional risk during this transitional phase.

A number of people are important in the social network of young people, including friends, peers and other adults, which are often seen as role models (Arnon, Shamai, & Ilatov, 2008). These role models/significant others could take the form of parents, teachers at a training institute, employers, site officials (e.g., shop stewards, OH&S representatives), work colleagues, formal/informal mentors in the workplace, as well as other peers or significant others such as family members/relatives/romantic partners (Corney & Du Plessis, 2010). In general, close relationships are characterised by a mutual interdependence, social support and psychological attachment (Wieselquist, 2007). People who are closely connected mutually relate to each other, and have relationships which are characterised by openness, trust, self-disclosure, friendliness and respect (McCann & Baker, 2001). Research indicates that respect remains an important and valued characteristic of close relationships across the lifespan (Blieszner, 2000). During adolescence the peer group becomes significantly more salient and belonging to a peer group forms an important part of the developing adolescent's identity-seeking process (Durkin, 1995). Although the peer group remains important in young adulthood the young person increasingly moves away from the support of a circle of peers developed at school. There is also a marked shift during this period toward intimate and close romantic relationships (Masten *et al.*, 2004). These romantic relationships may have some of the same characteristics eminent in close friendships, namely trust, support, closeness and friendship (Larson, Whitton, & Hauser, 2007).

Social support in close relationships consists of a number of different domains, including “emotional support, appraisal and affirmation, informational assistance, intimacy, comfort, and physical affection” (Hale, Hannum, & Espelage 2005, p.276). Friendships and close relationships are maintained through the provision of social support to each other (Fehr 2000), and the structure and content of these social networks provide the individual with ‘social capital’ (“the goodwill available to individuals or groups” (Feeney & Bozeman, 2008, p.1652). Research indicates that supportive relationships and enhanced network ties are associated with lower levels of psychological distress, improved academic adjustment, career development and job opportunities (e.g., Ruegger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2010; Feeney & Bozeman 2008; Umberson *et al.*, 1996). Supportive relationships act as a barrier to developing poor psychological health, and improve individuals' resilience (e.g., Murray-Harvey & Slee 2007). Parental support is specifically associated with better academic adjustment, higher self-esteem and lower depressive symptoms, whereas support from the peer group manifests as a lower presentation of depression (Ruegger *et al.*, 2010).

Parents and extended family continue to play an important support role in the lives of young adults (Arnon *et al.*, 2008). For example, recent Australian research indicate that 70% of parents (of adult children aged 23 - 24) believed that they provided emotional support to their sons and daughters. In the same study an even higher proportion (85% - 88%) of young adults aged 23 - 24 indicated that they sought emotional support from their parents (e.g., their parents listen to them and/or help them with problems) (Vasallo, Smart, & Price-Robertson 2009). Ross and Mirowsky (2002) found that when people report high levels of emotional support in their lives, their subjective expectations are that they will live longer lives. This is based on people's belief that if you have someone who cares for you they will take care of you when you are not well, and this causes people to have a greater sense of security about

surviving future health crises (Ross & Mirowsky, 2002). Conversely, a perceived lack of emotional support place people at risk of isolation and decreases people's subjective sense of well-being and longevity.

Although researchers have identified the importance of social networks in providing social support which assists with psychological and physical well-being, the social support domains which specifically affect physical health have been less clear (e.g., Franks, Campbell, & Shields 1992). However, recent research indicates that 'belonging' (as a factor of emotional/social support) specifically predicts health, with young men specifically experiencing fewer health-related symptoms when they have a sense of belonging (Hale *et al.*, 2005). This is in line with attachment theories which predict the presence of significant others, and the connectedness experienced with significant others, produces a sense of security (West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994). In contrast, when young men are isolated or disconnected from their social networks they are at increased risk of poor health and mental health outcomes during this transitional phase (e.g., Durkin, 1995).

As noted above, young apprentices are in a transitional period as they move from school to work. If not negotiated successfully these transitions might be associated with increased risks for poor health and/or mental health outcomes. The support systems available to apprentices are of particular importance in assisting them to successfully negotiate these transitions and successfully complete their apprenticeships. Numerous studies have focused on support during adolescence (e.g., Allen & Miga, 2010; Arnon *et al.*, 2008; Rueger *et al.*, 2010) with college students (e.g., Hale *et al.*, 2005; Larson *et al.*, 2007; Wieselquist, 2007) or with adult populations in general (e.g., Ross & Mirowsky, 2002; Umberson *et al.*, 1996) however, it is less clear in what way young working men, particularly male apprentices (who are deemed to be at higher risk than young women, e.g., suicide risk – ABS, 2010) engage with significant others during this period. Research indicates that peers, parents and romantic partners play an important supportive role during this phase. However, it is not clear whether there are any particular characteristics that young men value when they search out a significant other for support, particularly in the work and training context.

## **Industry-based research and program**

### *Research*

The aim of the research was to gain a better understanding of close relationships in this population of male construction industry apprentices, to describe the preferred characteristics of significant others, and to gain a better understanding of the manifestation and role of these relationships in their lives.

Data was gathered through a questionnaire delivered by two apprentice support workers who conduct a life skills presentation (see *Program* for more detail) in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges. 146 Male apprentices were surveyed, the majority of which were in their first year (74%), lived with their parents (73%) or partner (14%) and were Anglo-Australian (92%). The mean age was 20 years ( $SD = 5.89$ ), with 73% of respondents under the age of 21. For further survey detail refer to Du Plessis and Corney (2011).

### *Life Care Skills Program*

All first year construction industry apprentices in Victoria receive a 1.5 hour life care skills presentation from Incolink's apprentice support workers in their respective TAFEs. The life care skills program is federally funded with the overarching aim of reducing suicide in young

men. These interactive and educational sessions focus on a range of domains relevant to young men's health and wellbeing, including relationships, finances, drugs and alcohol, bullying and depression. Life care skill sessions focus on building resilience by developing apprentices' knowledge around these topics. One of the explicit aims of the program is to highlight the importance of accessing appropriate support services, including from peers and significant others. Another key aspect of the program is to develop a culture of supportive peer networks – *where mates look out for mates*.

The life care skills program was externally evaluated by Victoria University in 2010, and focused on longitudinal (6 months to 2 years) retention of program messages by using interview data ( $N = 18$ ) and a self-report questionnaire ( $N = 119$ ).

The results of the research and external evaluation of the life care skills program are discussed below.

## **Findings and discussion**

### *Who do apprentices turn to for support?*

Findings from the external evaluation indicate that the majority of apprentices (90%) are able to identify sources of support and that they find other people's advice useful when solving their own problems. Peers, family members and romantic partners were the main people that young working men turned to for social and emotional support. Additional sources of support could also be found in the workplace in the form of employers, co-workers, shop stewards, site officials and teaching staff who often act as natural mentors in the lives of young apprentices. This is in line with other research on close relationships (e.g., Durkin, 1995; Larson et al., 2007).

The 'support' included discussing the events of the day, turning to someone that would help them with their problems, and trusting someone with a secret. The key attributes of these relationships with other significant adults were trust, respect and friendship, with the gender of the support person of lesser importance. Irrespective of who the apprentice chose to share a secret with, trust was a key aspect of that relationship. Trust is future-oriented and impacts on the longevity of a relationship (Wieselquist, 2007). These significant adults were important to apprentices because they could be trusted, and conversely the trust that they have in these people contribute to the significance of these relationships. Findings from the external program evaluation confirm this and indicate that for apprentices close significant others, such as friends and family members are trusted sources of support.

### *Social isolation in 10% of apprentice population*

Whilst most apprentices were able to find social support in their significant others, the study indicates that 10% of apprentices were identified as 'at risk' of social isolation, as they did not have anyone to turn to for support or who they could trust with a personal matter. This figure is confirmed by the external program evaluation which also found that 10% of apprentices did not have anyone that they could turn to for advice or support. Previous research indicates that social isolation and detachment from social networks has detrimental outcomes for individuals' wellbeing and decreases resilience (e.g., Ryff, 1995; Larson et al., 2007). When facing obstacles these socially isolated apprentices might have no one to turn to for support, and this could place them at risk, not only for poor health and mental health outcomes, but also for non-completion of their apprenticeship. In turn, non-completion could detrimentally affect their work skill development (Hill & Dalley-Trim, 2008) and subsequently lead to further skill shortages in the building and construction industry.

### *Mates looking out for mates*

Whilst there is still some reticence amongst young males to seek support for health and mental health issues (e.g., Du Plessis et al., 2009), social support networks play an important role in enhancing resilience and linking to information about formal/professional support structures. In general, young men are often able to identify a troubled peer, but this does not always translate to active support.

In addition to increasing self-help behaviour, it was an explicit aim of the life care skills program to enhance peer-support. The life care skills program aims to increase young men's knowledge about a range of potential factors affecting their health and wellbeing. The program evaluation indicates that apprentices who had undergone the program were able to identify a range of signs of 'someone doing it tough', (i.e., anger, aggression, signs of stress, being withdrawn or disinterested). Findings from the external program evaluation also found that one of the key messages retained by apprentices was the importance of looking out for mates and asking them about how they are going. In interviews some apprentices further indicated the importance of peer support, looking out for peers' wellbeing and directing peers in need to appropriate professional support services. As such, the limited data would appear to suggest that interventions, such as the life care skills program, are beginning to contribute apprentices increasingly looking out for their 'mates'.

## **Conclusion**

The results from both the research and the external program evaluation concur that supportive relationships are important in the lives of young working men. Supportive relationships provide a sense of belonging and contribute to building young men's resilience to face transitional challenges. The research reported here highlights the value of bolstering existing relational networks, for example, by equipping apprentices with skills and knowledge about risk factors for poor mental health so that they can provide peer-based support and referrals. Future research could attempt to quantify the role of supportive networks in apprentice completion. The research, also, did not explore the role of stressful relationships, which are purported to have a very different effect on youth resilience (e.g., Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2007). Future research could explore the effect of both supportive and stressful relationships on apprentices' resilience, and again attempt to quantify their results in relation to attrition.

The findings from the external program evaluation emphasises the relevance of developing tailor-made programs for young men which focus on the specific transitional issues that they might face in their context (e.g., bullying, relationship issues, financial issues). Future research could also examine the applicability of the life care skills program to other vulnerable groups of apprentices (e.g., service industry apprentices).

Finally, the findings highlight the need for increasing resources for socially isolated apprentices who might not benefit from current *informal* social support structures. These apprentices are most socially isolated (i.e., they have no one to share their problems with and they do not have ready access to information provided by informal support networks), and are most at risk of poor mental health outcomes and non-completion of their apprenticeship. In addition to expanding the reach of tailor-made programs (and thereby influencing traditional male-dominated work cultures to be more encouraging of help-seeking), and identifying those at risk, it is evident that for these 10% of young apprentices alternate support structures need to be developed. For example, this could include formal industry-based programs such

as mentoring, buddy systems or online support. In particular, it is hoped that the new Victoria-based Apprentice Support Officer roles (DEECD, 2010), developed under COAG national partnership initiatives, could assist in meeting apprentices' need for support, especially amongst isolated young workers.

## References

- Allen, J.P. & Miga, E.M. (2010). Attachment in adolescence: A move to the level of emotion regulation. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 27:2, 181–190.
- Arnon, S., Shamai, S. & Ilatov, Z. (2008). Socialization agents and activities of young adolescents. *Adolescence*, 43:170, 373-397.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS]. (2010). Causes of death, Australia, suicides 2008. ABS Catalogue No. 3303.0, Retrieved 6 January 2011 from <http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au>
- Blieszner, R. (2000). Close relationships in old age. In C. Hendrick & S.S. Hendrick (Eds.), *Close relationships: A sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Brooks, L. (2004). Australian vocational education and training statistics: Trends in traditional apprenticeships. NCVER: Adelaide.
- Corney, T., & Du Plessis, K. (2010). Apprentices' mentoring relationships: The role of 'significant others' and supportive relationships across the work-life domains. *Youth Studies Australia*, 29:3, 18-26.
- Corney, T. & Mackenzie, D. (2002). A survey of university student's relationship with a significant other. Unpublished research, RMIT University: Melbourne.
- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR]. (2010). Skills shortages Australia, June 2010. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra. Retrieved 5 January 2011 from <http://www.deewr.gov.au/Employment/LMI/SkillShortages/Documents/NationalSkillShortageReport.pdf>
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD]. 2010. Youth career and transition programs. State Government of Victoria. Retrieved 13 January, 2011 from <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/directions/nationalpartnerships/programs.htm>
- Du Plessis, K. & Corney, T. (2011). Trust, respect and friendship: The key attributes of significant others in the lives of young working men. *Youth Studies Australia*, 30:1.
- Du Plessis, K., Hoiles, L., Field, D., Corney, T. & Naphine, M. (2009), "I can cope": Young men's strengths and barriers to seeking help. *Counselling Australia*, 9:4, 93–99.
- Durkin, K. (1995). *Developmental social psychology: From infancy to old age*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers.
- Feeney, M.K. & Bozeman, B. (2008). Mentoring and network ties. *Human Relations*, 61:12, 1651–1676.
- Franks, P., Campbell, T.L. & Shields, C.G. (1992). Social relationships and health: The relative roles of family functioning and social support', *Social Science and Medicine*, 34, 779–788.
- Hale, C.J., Hannum, J.W. & Espelage, D.L. (2005). Social support and physical health: The importance of belonging. *Journal of American College Health*, 53:6, 276–284.
- Heller, T.S., Hawgood, J.L. & De Leo, D. (2007). Correlates of suicide in building industry workers. *Archives of Suicide Research*, 11:1, 105–117.
- Hill, A., & Dalley-Trim, L. (2008). Hanging in there: What makes a difference in the first year of an apprenticeship? *Youth Studies Australia*, 27:1, 36-42.

- Larson, J.J., Whitton, S.W., Hauser, S.T. & Allen, J.P. (2007). Being close and being social: Peer ratings of distinct aspects of young adult social competence. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 89:2,136-148.
- Masten, A.S., Burt, K.B., Roisman, G., Obradovic, J., Long, J.D. & Tellegen, A. (2004). Resources and resilience in the transition to adulthood: Continuity and change. *Development and Psychopathology*, 16, 1071–1094.
- McCann, T.V. & Baker, S. (2001). Mutual relating: Developing interpersonal relationships in the community, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 34:4, 530–537.
- Murray-Harvey, R. & Slee, P.T. (2007). Supportive and stressful relationships with teachers, peers and family, and their influence on students' social/emotional and academic experience of school. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 17:2, 126-147.
- Ross, .E. & Mirowsky, J., 2002, Family relationships, social support and subjective life expectancy. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 43, 469–489.
- Ruegger, S. Y., Malecki, C.K. & Demaray, M.K., (2010). Relationship between multiple sources of perceived social support and psychological and academic adjustment in early adolescence: Comparisons across gender. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 39, 47–61.
- Ryff, C.D. (1995). Psychological wellbeing in adult life. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 4:4, 99-104
- Umberson, D., Chen, M.D., House, J.S., Hopkins, K. & Slaten, E. (1996). The effect of social relationships on psychological well-being: Are men and women really so different? *American Sociological Review*, 61:5, 837–857.
- Vasallo, S., Smart, D. & Price-Robertson, R. (2009). The roles that parents play in the lives of their young adult children. *Family Matters*, 82, 8–14.
- West, M.L. & Sheldon-Keller, A.E. (1994). *Patterns of relating: An adult attachment perspective*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Wieselquist, J. (2007). Commitment and trust in young adult friendships. *Interpersona*, 1:2, 209–220.