

The Gold Within

Love4Life, Leicester

Introduction

Vulnerable young women from deprived areas are at particular risk of exploitation and abuse; this difficult truth was highlighted by recent cases of appalling abuse in Rotherham and Rochdale.

High rates of crime, real and perceived physical threats, and substance misuse – which are particularly prevalent in deprived communities – have a profoundly negative effect on girls' health and wellbeing.

In such chaotic and risky social environments, how can young women take ownership of their health outcomes and feel empowered to assert control over their lives? How can community-led group support in areas of deprivation foster self-confidence and healthier lives?

Origins of the project

Love4Life supports vulnerable girls at risk of pregnancy and abuse. Launched by Tenna Hulley, a leader at King's Church Loughborough, it is an initiative of TwentyTwenty, a charity dedicated to helping disadvantaged and disengaged young people. TwentyTwenty has secured funding from large grant funders including Children in Need, and has developed a fund raising team.

Through group activities and one-to-one sessions, Love4Life promotes empowerment, independence and confidence. The project encourages a healthy self-image and an awareness of general and sexual health.

The project works with girls aged between 10 and 19, running four groups within housing estates in Charnwood, outside Loughborough. Typically the teens are under pressure to participate in sexual and gang-related activity; have limited contact with biological fathers; have limited support networks; see substance abuse and domestic violence in the home; and have few boundaries.

Such pressures amount to a damaging, toxic environment that is harmful to their health and wellbeing. Self-esteem and aspirations are diminished, leading to risky sexual relationships, self-harming, opting out of school, developing substance addictions, and eating poorly.

“We hope that we are helping the girls in Love4Life to be happier, healthier adults and eventually mothers,” says Izzy Neale, support development manager at TwentyTwenty. “We want to break the cycles of educational disengagement, anti-social behaviour and young motherhood we often see, hopefully improving the future for their whole family.”

Partnership working

Love4Life maintains good relationships with social services, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, and the police. The project receive and give referrals to these agencies as well as school nurses and family support workers.

Love4Life is advising on the Leicestershire Teenage Pregnancy Partnership's development of a Quality Framework for young parents.

Approach and delivery

Love4Life currently works with 70-80 young people each week and over the last year has supported more than 150 girls. The project operates in wards identified by the Index of Multiple Deprivation as priority areas for intervention. The supportive peer group format crucially provides a safe environment.

Love4Life groups of around 10 girls from a similar age meet on a weekly basis, offering a diverse array of activities including dance, Zumba, art, gym trips, self-defence skills and cookery. Sessions on decision-making, online safety, pornography and relationships are also provided.

In addition to building confidence and skills, Love4Life aims to support girls in developing their aspirations. "We encourage the girls to find the gold within – in other words, their potential," says Neale. "One girl was interested in cars but didn't even consider working with them as a possibility. We arranged a trip for her to see planes being made. For the first time she could see engineering as a possible career path, something she would be passionate about pursuing."

Love4Life also offers individual counselling sessions to girls who may not be ready to attend a group; these are helpful in supporting teens with complex and deep-rooted problems.

Success and outcomes

Love4Life has experienced considerable growth and success. Police have reported an 89% decrease in anti-social behaviour from the girls in the groups, and the number of offences has dropped by 82%.

Self-reporting tools have demonstrated that the 95% of the girls now know what healthy relationships look like, and 86% have improved relationships at home. All reported a reconnection with school learning.

Love4Life has had an impact on the girls' physical health, with 80% wanting to continue physical activity. Of the 87 young people who asked for support to stop smoking, 10 have quit, and six stopped using cannabis. One girl who had a positive pregnancy test went onto to finish college and has created a healthy, happy home for her child.

Less quantifiable are health benefits from a 'feel good factor': confident girls who feel good about themselves are less likely to be in risky relationships, abuse alcohol or drugs, are less likely to become young parents, and will have better mental health.

Future plans and obstacles

TwentyTwenty hopes to establish a similar group for boys, and is in the process of expanding work to Derby and Sheffield.

Conclusion

Love4Life represents a regular and sustained presence in the girls' lives, fostering friendships, trust and a healthy self-image. The project demonstrates how establishing a supportive peer network can build confidence and skills, thus positively impacting on young women's physical and mental health. Grass-roots action at a family and community level can have a profound effect on girls' lives and futures.

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