

SOAR



**The honest
and straight
talking toolkit
for parents &
teenagers vol 2**

In partnership with

DAVY

Who are Soar?

THERE IS GREATNESS WITHIN EVERY TEENAGER.

Sometimes silent, sometimes raging, sometimes shining, sometimes stuck... It is there waiting to be discovered and encouraged. We are Soar. We help teens discover who they are and what they can achieve.

Since 2012, Soar has always been the vanguard in Ireland when it comes to a preventative approach to teenage wellbeing. We do not want to wait until problems have arisen. That is not what teenage years should be about. Our vision is to empower teenagers to fulfil their potential and enrich the world. We are striving towards this vision every day by creating and delivering

programmes focused on a 'well-being for all' approach, where every teenager has the opportunity to build critical emotional and mental skills early in their lives and prevent more acute long-term mental difficulties arising. With these skills they can cope better with the challenges and stresses that come with everyday life and go on to thrive and fulfil their potential. We believe that exploration of the question "Who am I?" is a pathway to living an authentic life. Soar connects with teens to explore their inner character – follow their true path – and not what's pushed on them from society, adults, peers and the media.

So far, we have:

Worked with over **55,000** teenagers

Created **7** groundbreaking programmes

Onboarded **40** young adults at various stages of facilitator training

Created an out of school programme - to continue experiencing early intervention and character building spaces post workshop

n=3693

What young people say about us:

92% of those who responded said they feel more capable of having honest conversations with the people in their lives because of the Soar workshop

91% of respondents said they feel more motivated to pursue your potential after attending the Soar workshop

98% of teenagers that responded to our survey would recommend a Soar workshop to others.

97% of respondents said they had a better understanding of the people and things that influence their daily lives after attending a workshop.

We have won:

Social Entrepreneurs Ireland Impact Award, Vodafone World of Difference Award, Captain Cathal Ryan Award & Rethink Ireland "Game Changer" 2018 – 2021

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**WE'RE FOR
TEENAGERS**



Mark McDonnell, CEO

The way things are...

AS THE DUST BEGINS TO SETTLE AFTER A BIZARRE AND UTTERLY TRANSFORMATIVE FEW YEARS, WE ARE NOW GRAPPLING TO UNDERSTAND THE IMPACT THIS PERIOD HAS HAD ON OUR TEENAGERS, AND HOW TO BEST SUPPORT THEM MOVING FORWARD.

But first, we as the adults of this country need to collectively stand to attention and applaud our teenagers. They've had it harder than most. Teenage years are a time for exploration, for growing, for stretching comfort zones, and for taking risks. These are not selfish teenage indulgences, but rather the normal function of a teenage brain developing and behaving exactly as it should. The part of the 16-year-old brain craving risk, adventure, and connection is in overdrive, while the area of the brain responsible for rational decision making and appreciating others' perspectives is still in development. Over the last few years, we have asked teenagers to go against everything that surges naturally

through them, and is in fact developmentally essential, in an attempt to keep us safe. They have been heroic in holding back the powerful natural forces within them and they deserve to be honoured rather than vilified.

There's no doubt that the demands placed on our teenagers have resulted in suffering for many. While delivering workshops nationwide throughout the pandemic we have seen a change in many classrooms. Our internal monitoring and evaluation backs up what our facilitators were seeing on the ground, with teenagers feeling lonely and isolated, more worried about normal day-to-day experiences, emotionally blocked, and their inner confidence suffering. We are also

seeing the impact of the restricted emotional and social development of our teenagers on the 2022/2023 cohort with it taking longer for them to be comfortable speaking about their experiences and emotions in our workshops. Of course there are many factors and variances contributing to how a young person behaves, but not being around their friends where peer-to-peer support is essential, not being able to process complex emotions with others, and a lack of confidence in how to interact with the outside world are all dynamics at play. Understandably, we have prioritised safety and control around our teenagers in recent years, but now is the time to allow the pendulum swing back in the other direction.

Our teenagers are resilient. They are wise. They are capable. They are often much more able than us adults appreciate. I believe we are at a critical juncture where as adults we must be brave and be willing to evaluate our approach to nurturing teenagers. We must ask ourselves, what are the normal stresses and worries our teenagers need to experience in order to build their resilience? Rather than reacting to remove any discomfort from their lives. We must ask ourselves, when do we need to trust their judgement and their ability to navigate challenging circumstances? Rather than problem-solve on their behalf. When do we need to ask questions rather than give answers?

It's an incredibly tricky balance to strike. But if we are to assist our teenagers to build the resilience, inner confidence, and have the ability to regulate and manage the

emotions required to navigate daily life and relationships, it is worthy of our effort.

We recognise this in Soar, and that is why we will continue to provide environments that are 'real', psychologically safe, and non-judgemental where teenagers can come together to figure stuff out and support each other in doing so. Watching teenagers recognise that they are not broken, that they have what it takes and that they have agency over their lives is one of the most invigorating experiences we in Soar have the privilege to witness on a weekly basis.

We have a long way to travel in this country to where the social and emotional development of teenagers is prioritised as much as their academic development. Both developmental areas are essential and inter-dependant. The education system is understandably overly geared towards their academic development, but an alignment is required. That is why Soar is fully committed to our mission of every transition year student in the country receiving a Soar programme by 2027 – that means generations of teenagers with the emotional awareness, self-belief, and resilience to navigate life's challenges, and thrive.

But for now, as the memory of what it is to be a teenager infuses us with the energy of life, let's celebrate our young people back out there doing what they are designed to do - taking holidays with friends. Falling in love. Staying out till dusk with their mates. Going to concerts together. Finishing school. All the essential rites of passage they had to postpone for way too long.

The Teen Journal



WHAT'S IT REALLY LIKE TO BE A TEENAGER THESE DAYS?

Amber

There is immense pressure on teenagers to do so much stuff these days. Teachers giving lots of homework and then being told to study while still being told to keep up with hobbies, exercise and eat well and to try get a job to earn a bit of money for yourself while also trying to have a social life outside of school and have time to yourself all while getting at least 8 hours of sleep and to be honest it is not at all possible, that doesn't include the pressures of social media to be "perfect" which is a whole other issue.

It's hard trying to get adults to understand that the reason that we might do things could be because of everything else going on and trying to get them to understand that life is so very different to the life that they grew up with.

Being a teenager is tough, but it's also a beautiful experience enjoying life knowing you will never be the age again. Adults need to understand that if we talk it doesn't mean we want answers, sometimes it's just good to talk and get it out there.

Anon



Katie

It's weird. If you're a girl and not pretty you're just not accepted. No one talks to you no one sits near you, no one gives you a chance. Boys who are quiet are teased in a joking way but I'm sure it gets to them. I don't feel this way personally, but I've heard with the younger teenagers that there's extreme pressure on social media platforms to like and share people's posts, it starts a loop, you have to share theirs and they have to share yours or you're outcast. It's upsetting to hear how the way of socialising is changing so much in such short time.

I think the biggest challenge facing teenagers that I can think of right now is mental health. I myself have quite bad anxiety that affects my social life, and for the past almost 2 years I've been developing what I think is depression.

There are people in my school that are supposed to help all students and things like that, which is supposed to mean us with mental health issues. I'm sure they think they're doing it, and I do know they're not trained for it, and at times they have honestly just made some parts of my school life worse. Social isolation is also a massive thing. If you're not outgoing or attractive, if you ever do say something to someone, they kind of give a "ugh.." reaction. Like a kind of "why are you talking to me?" thing. It may just be me personally but this is how I feel. It's just impossible to talk to people because everyone has their groups and I don't.

I wish people could understand that some of us struggle with stuff. Yes we may miss school or not do well, but it's not always on purpose.



HAPPY ♥
Inspired ♥
Excited ♥



I just wanted to say thank you for everything. I'll admit I hated the workshop, but ultimately I needed it & the one to one talk at the end but more importantly that boost of confidence you gave me. Consider this & the picture my way of saying thank you & I wish you all the very best of luck in the future.

Thanks again.
Eric.



Nancy

Being a teenager can be stressful and hard knowing that decisions you make as a teenager regarding education and future jobs can impact your adult life. It feels that adults don't take our struggles seriously or disregard them as if they were not in the positions we are in at one point. There's so many changes in life with hormones and friends and how you think about other people and yourself. It was be really draining but being a teenager is a wholly unique time in life that everyone experiences and should be celebrated not dreaded.

It's honestly hard to be a teenager now. It feels like no one wants to hear you. they'll listen but they won't hear. You're either too young or too inexperienced to comment on anything, and it sucks even more when you have opinions that you really, really believe in, and no one wants to listen to you

I'd like adults to understand that the world you create today is the world we live in tomorrow. Every choice you make, we will know, and we will have to bear the burden of it. We know our earth, and we know you're hurting it, and doing nothing to stop it.

Anon

We don't know how to handle stress and manage our time. Nowadays, students' motivation comes from not wanting to fail/ do badly, when it should be coming from their aspirations and to validate their effort and learning.

Anon

In primary school most students would rarely have thought about the way they look and what other people think. Around Junior Cycle age is when those pressures start to seep in and potentially cause harm. I don't think many people actually know how to make friends... in primary school it just kind of happens because you're always with each other, that's not the case in secondary school.

Anon

Being a teenager is like living with the knowledge that your planet has been destroyed, and not being able to contribute to the large change that needs to be done, and hoping the little changes you do make our impactful.

We are the younger version of yous, and we can handle responsibility and have a potentially impactful voice, if we are given the chance

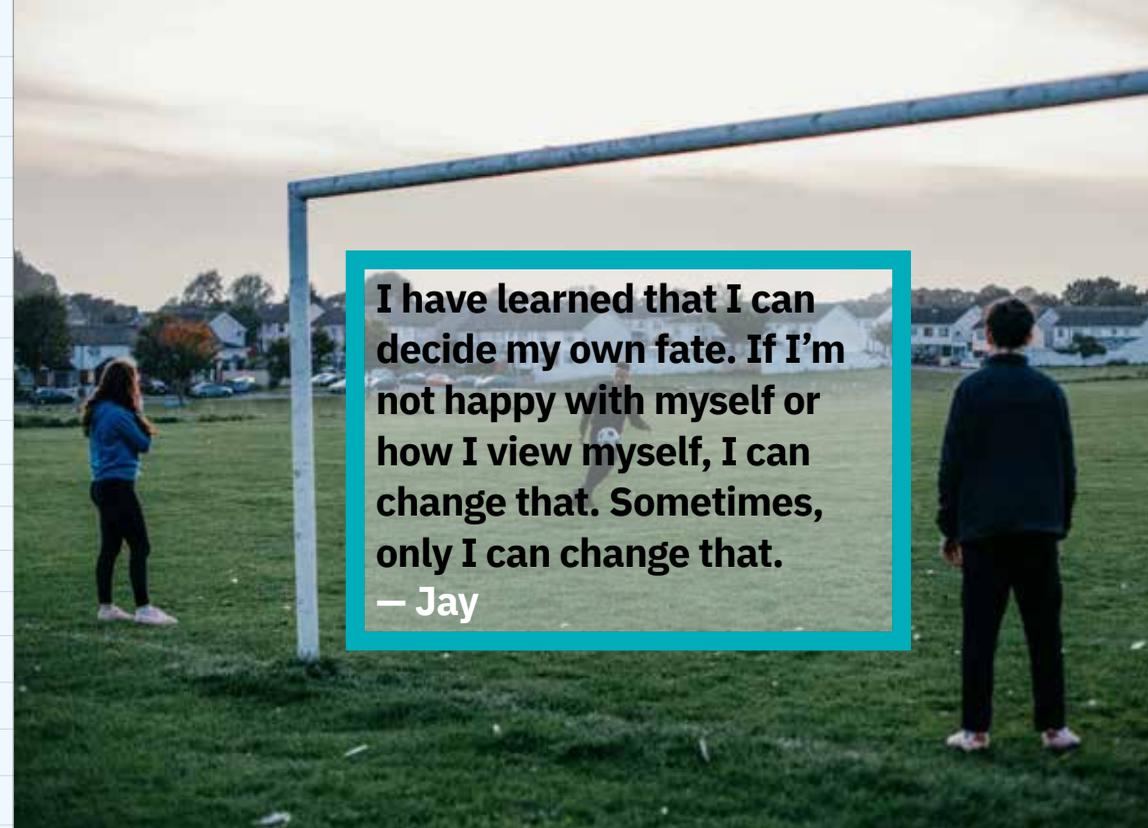
Anon

The biggest challenges facing young people is the pressure to succeed and the fear about what will happen if you don't. Fear of not having money/housing. The horrible leaving cert too.

Anon

Ben's Poem

We meet	Your eyes see a beauty
We talk	Not because you choose to
You talk	Because it's there
I fall apart	And you have the value
You listen	You see it
You hear	
You inspire	You wish for a mirror
You show	But my eyes are fogged
You unveil	You talk
You show good	We talk
Worth	You distract
Value	But you try
	And it means the world.



I have learned that I can decide my own fate. If I'm not happy with myself or how I view myself, I can change that. Sometimes, only I can change that.

— Jay

Theres a lot of stereotypes that all teens are disruptive to society but a lot of us are always trying to help and want to make things better for society
— Anon



**I have learned that
the world waits for
nobody and when
things change, we
must change too.
The world would be
pretty boring without
change anyway.**

— Crew member

Raising Resilient Teens

RICHARD HOGAN



As a family psychotherapist with a systemic approach, working predominantly with teenagers, I've observed a shift in the issues adolescents present in therapeutic sessions. Traditionally, teenagers grappled with questions of identity, instances of bullying, or a rupture with peers. Over the last several years, however, the spotlight has increasingly been on anxiety. This condition is impacting their ability to attend school, engage in sports, or simply socialise with friends. This rising trend warrants analysis and begs the question - why are today's teenagers experiencing such a high level of anxiety?

One could argue that the modern-day statistics suggest we are in the midst of an anxiety pandemic. So, what factors have brought us to this point? A significant element of this phenomenon, I believe, is the subtle, yet potent effect of technology on human connections.

We are, by nature, social creatures. We thrive on connection and interactions with our peers. In the past, such interactions and the accompanying positive feedback from these exchanges played a crucial role in shaping neural pathways in the brain in a positive way. The advent of smartphones and multiplayer games, however, has reshaped this dynamic. While technology was developed to connect us, ironically, it has ended up disrupting our fundamental sense of connectivity.

As parents and caregivers, it becomes our responsibility to navigate this evolving landscape. Ensuring our children aren't excessively absorbed in their devices or games is a start. Yet, technology isn't solely to blame. The way we parent also plays a critical role.

Are some children simply born more resilient than others? Or does resilience stem from the environment and experiences surrounding them?

When discussing this with parents, I often use the analogy of teaching our children to cross the road. We guide them through the process, pointing out the dangers and assuring them they can cross safely once these have passed. We don't promise them that we will always be there to hold their hand - we equip them with the tools to handle it independently.

The same concept applies to adversity. We must focus on building our children's repertoire of coping mechanisms so they can meet challenges head-on. By doing this, we ensure they have the skills to face any obstacle life might present. A crucial part of this process is teaching them to problem solve independently, resisting the urge to resolve issues for them.

Being by your child's side, rather than on it, is the key. Solving problems for them can deplete their personal toolbox, while guiding them to think through challenges helps them to manage anxiety when it arises.

Remember, nurturing resilience isn't about eliminating adversity but empowering our teens to navigate through it. Our goal should be to equip them with the tools and the confidence to face, learn from, and overcome challenges. This is the cornerstone of raising resilient teens in today's complex world.

Richard Hogan is a systemically trained family psychotherapist registered with the Family Therapy Association of Ireland. He's the author of two books: 'Parenting the Screenager' and 'Home is where the start is', both of which provide insightful strategies and guidance on navigating the unique challenges of modern parenting. Richard contributes a weekly column to the Irish Examiner, where he explores mental health issues pertinent to teenagers, couples, and families. Shortlisted for a Fulbright scholarship, Richard is recognized as an expert in the field of human behaviour. His expertise is frequently sought on popular media platforms such as The Hard Shoulder with Ivan Yates (Newstalk), The Today Show (RTE), and Weekend AM (Virgin Media), where he offers strategies to overcome teenage mental health issues.



A letter to Parents and Guardians

FROM A PARENT
AND GUARDIAN

EXPOSURE TO SOAR HAS BEEN AN INCREDIBLY POSITIVE EXPERIENCE FOR MY TEENAGERS.

It has allowed them to get to know strangers, friends and classmates at a different level. It has shown them that the perfectly curated lives online are not real. As a parent, thinking of my own teenage years, I remember the feeling of wanting to fit in. However, we certainly didn't have the constant pressure for excellence, expectation of always being happy and relentless exposure to social media that teenagers have today. We may have suspected we weren't included in certain things but didn't have to witness our exclusion publicly.

By creating safe spaces where teenagers can be themselves and talk about what really matters to them, they learn that true happiness lies in embracing your individuality, pursuing your passions, and nurturing your relationships with others.

Soar has also helped teach them they are not alone and that sharing their thoughts, fears and dreams with others can help during challenging times. As a parent, my concern for their well-being is ever-present. I think Soar has tapped into the most positive aspects of teenagers – their openness, endless possibilities for growth, self-discovery, their clear sense of justice and wanting to make a difference in the world. I wish every teenager in Ireland could get this experience. Society would reap the benefit for years.

Niamh, mum to three teenagers who have benefited from the Soar experience.

The view of teenagers is the most important to change something, it's important to listen and to ask, and to understand or try to understand.

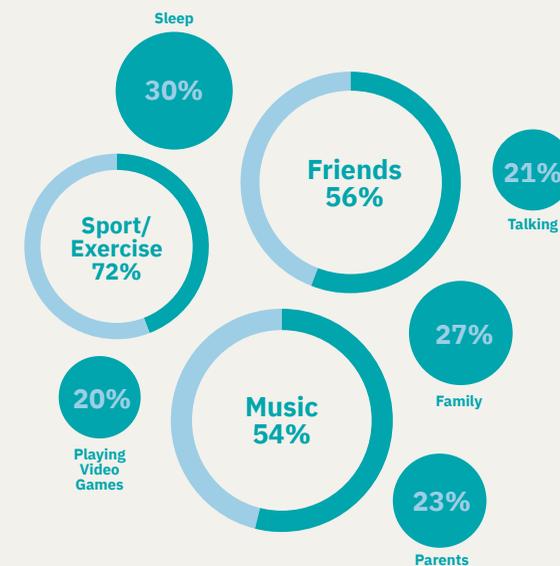
— Anon

Adolescents are demonstrating **positive awareness** of mental health problems and help-seeking.

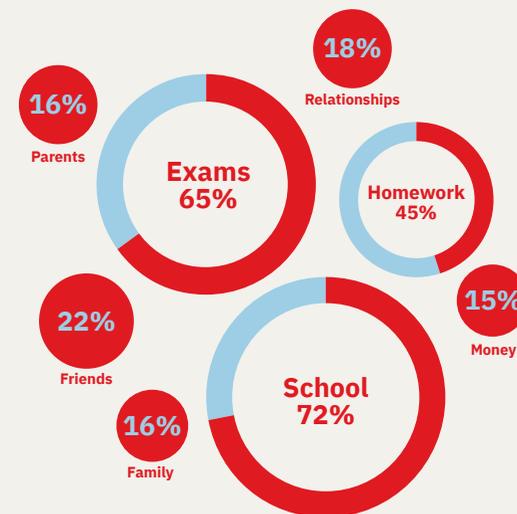


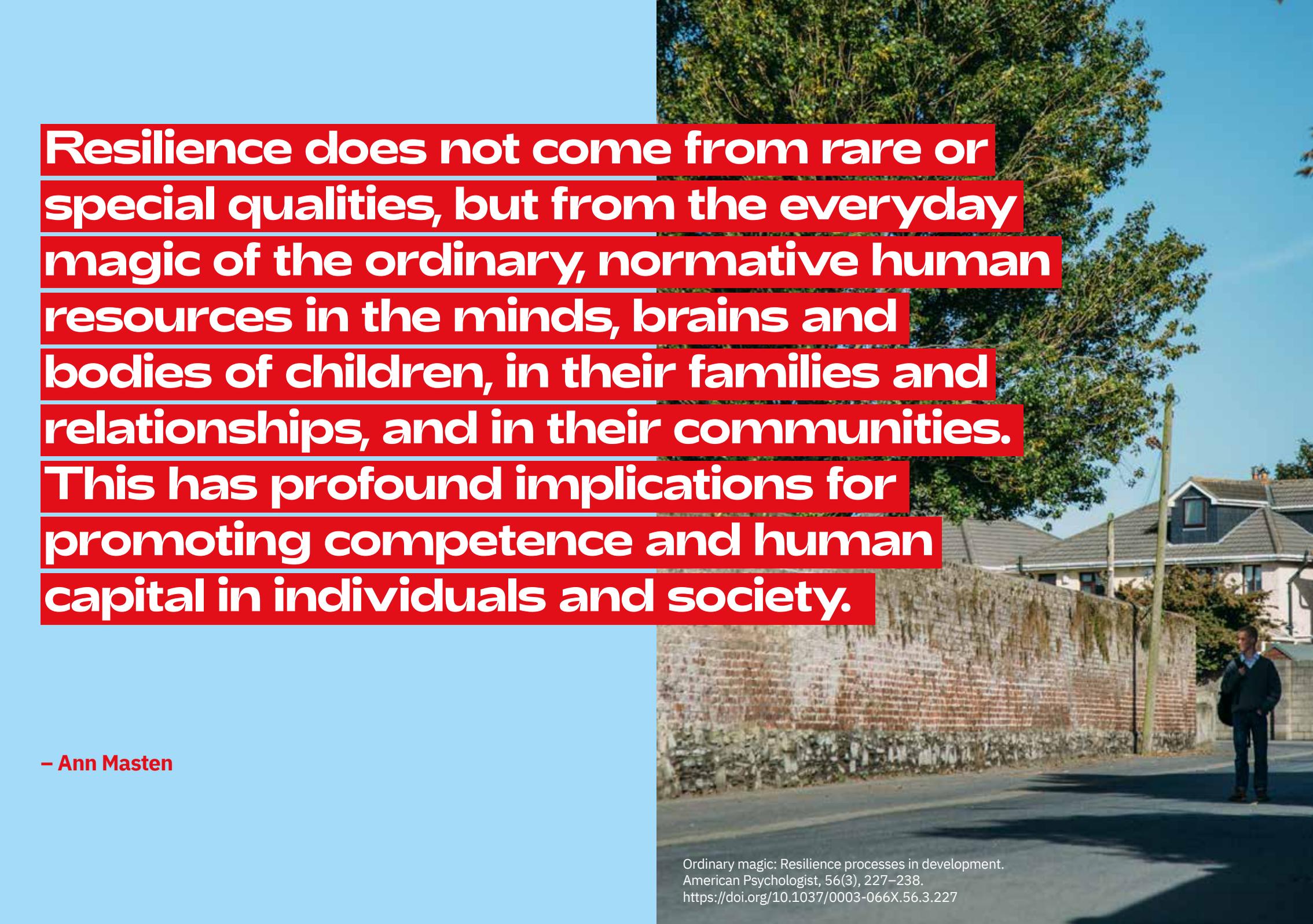
According to the 'My World Survey 2' by UCD School of Psychology and Jigsaw.

WHEN ASKED WHAT ARE THE TOP THREE COPING STRATEGIES IN ADOLESCENTS' LIVES:



WHEN ASKED WHAT ARE THE TOP THREE STRESSORS IN ADOLESCENTS' LIVES:



A photograph of a residential street. In the foreground, a paved road curves to the right. A brick wall runs along the left side of the road. In the background, there are houses with grey roofs and green trees under a clear blue sky. A person is walking on the sidewalk to the right.

Resilience does not come from rare or special qualities, but from the everyday magic of the ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities. This has profound implications for promoting competence and human capital in individuals and society.

– Ann Masten

Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development.
American Psychologist, 56(3), 227–238.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.227>

Guide for Parents



Guide for difficult conversations

Soar talks to over 7,000 teenagers a year. They share with us their fears, the first loves, their dreams, and the thoughts that keep them up at night. We feel really privileged that they welcome us into their world, and we know it is because we are experts at difficult conversations. There is nothing too small, nothing too scary, nothing too weird for us to talk about. We believe that clear communication is the cornerstone of good relationships, so here is our guide to having a difficult conversation.

Getting the basics right

- Find a common goal and start from there, i.e. “Look, we both want a home where we feel respected, so let’s talk about how we can make that happen”
- If you hold them accountable to agreements, then they get to do the same!
- If it’s getting heated and emotions are high, you should breathe, lower the tone, and return to the common goal.
- Don’t go into a conversation with expectations. You may leave the best of friends, or you may have to walk away and calm down. Having the courage to sit and talk it through is the important thing.

What teens want adults to know

“A lot of teenagers want to be treated like adults and a lot of adults are aware of that. Unfortunately, some of them don’t know how. I think that this involves being honest and listening. When teenagers are listening to adults, although it may only be occasionally, we want to be told the truth and told all of the truth. It works both ways though and when we do speak, don’t just hear it, listen! Teenagers have a lot to say if you listen :)”

“Often they want to talk to you but might be afraid you won’t understand or will give them advice instead of just listening.”

“We need space. Instead of always giving out give us the space we need to calm down. Life isn’t easy we need a break after school not parents giving out we haven’t our room clean etc. Once we have that time, we can go to you if we feel ready. Otherwise, we will just end up saying or doing things we regret because we are in bad form”

“That they were once teenagers. That at the end of the day everybody needs to be listened to and deserves to be no matter what age they are or if you view their problem as not as important”

How to hold a courageous conversation:

- Sometimes just listening is enough, you don't have to have all the answers.
- When holding someone else in a conversation try not to compare their situation to your situation straight away if you're trying to make them feel less alone in it. What they're saying can need its own space and time first.
- Watch Brene Brown's Empathy VS Sympathy short clip on YouTube. It's very helpful for seeing what someone might need to hear when they have just shared something with you.
- Try a new environment- sometimes getting out of the house or familiar surroundings can help you to have a different kind of conversation with someone. This might be a new coffee spot, a walk somewhere new, the car etc.
- Be willing to ask and answer questions, when you are opening up a conversation for a young person, they need to know it is a two way street not an interrogation. They will respect your honesty, and willingness to go there.

Some conversation starter questions:

- What do you think is the biggest difference between now and when I was a teen?
- How do you handle stress?
- What has been your highlight of the past year?
- What has been the biggest challenge in your life so far?
- If you could make one agreement for us all as a family to follow, what would it be?
- Do you ever feel like I don't understand you? When?

Remember you are doing great! There is no rule book and the fact that you are looking for answers means you are on the right path. So be good to yourself!

- What was your childhood dream job? Is that still your dream? Why is/isn't that your dream?
- Who is someone you look up to/admire and why?
- What do you like most about yourself?
- When was the last time you cried? Can you remember why?
- What is a trait that you value most in a friend/friendship?
- Where do you want to be ten years from now?
- How are you really doing?
- Is there anything you need from me right now?
- Something I don't talk about enough is...
- One compliment that's always stuck with me is...
- The thing that I am most insecure about is...What's your favourite thing about me?
- If you really knew me, you would know...

A helpful guide to self-care:

You are important. You are raising a human. Give yourself a break. Self-care is not just an excuse to check out of life, it is a vital part of allowing us to check in, but in a way that is manageable and connected. Make time for just yourself. Do something that makes you feel joy. Here are some recommendations from our team.

- **Roar** – Go to the nearest cliff, sea, lake or empty field. Breath in, open your mouth and roar and scream that tension away
- **Exercise** – sometimes getting a good sweat on can be a great physical release to the stress we hold
- **Talk** – start with a mate or someone you trust. If you're worried about yourself then seek out a therapist or counsellor. We all need to talk.
- **Laugh** – watch a comedy or call that mate that always gives you belly laughs.
- **Dance** – Even if it is around your kitchen. Be silly and shake that energy through your body.
- **Get creative** – Pick up that guitar, camera, pen, paint and just go for it. Let yourself explore, you don't need to be good.

Let's talk...

The previous pages have given you the tools for having a great conversation. Here is the challenge to go and do it. Below are some prompt questions for adults and teens to answer together to get you started. Remember great conversations are a two-way street. If you want to get honest answers, that means being brave and answering honestly yourself.

What's the hardest challenge both of you have experienced in the past few years?

Looking back now, would you have done anything differently?

**Can you remember
when you last laughed
your head off?**

**Who is important
to you, and why?**

With no fear and everything possible, what would you be doing this time next year?

How would that make you feel?

The work of Soar would not be possible without the support of our partners. Their collaboration is essential to Soar's long-term sustainability. These organisations provide us with funding, expertise, and buckets of moral support. All ingredients we need to create the authentic spaces that our young people so desperately need. We are so grateful for their consistent support and guidance.



WE'RE FOR TEENAGERS

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**I thought if
I don't think
about it, it
will go away
but it didn't.**

- Jack



Donate to Soar



SOAR