

Youth Advisors and youth information: a peer-to-peer approach

by Vera Hoogsteijns

Images courtesy of Jong & Van Zin



Youth Advisors

Our “Youth Advisor” project started in 1991 as a co-operation programme between our organisation (youth work) and the JAC (Youth Advice Centre), which is part of the general welfare centres (Centrum Algemeen Welzijnswerk (CAW) in Dutch). Since then, about 4 000 youngsters (15 to 18 years old) have officially been trained to be Youth Advisors.

The idea is simple: we believe in the power of peer support and that’s why Youth Advice Centres train young people in their region in communication skills, the ability to listen to their peers and the ability to recognise problems. We try to work within the informal networks that exist between young people and to make young people more resilient, while focusing on their personal strengths. They are also informed about available support systems in the Flemish context so they can refer their peers to the right service when needed and provide them with quality youth information.

Making young people stronger

Jong & Van Zin focuses on the talents and strengths of children and young people. We pay close attention to their capabilities. In everything we do, produce and organise, we focus on the things they’re good at. Because of our expertise in training and informing, we have the possibility to make children and young people stronger:

stronger in what they’re already good at, but also stronger in their basic skills of communication, interaction, listening, etc. Through interactive methods, they practice their skills and we expand their ability to be a good friend for their peers.

Making young people aware

By working in a group, we try to make young people aware of signals which peers can send. We show them how to react when they think there might be something going on in the life of one of their peers. We believe that being aware of feelings, opinions and possible problems of friends and peers is a very important first step.

Making sure they know their options when support is needed

When we want to enable youngsters to refer their peers to the correct information or support system, it’s very important they know about the options and possibilities available. In this part of our training, we work on their knowledge about the Flemish support system, but also about specific topics. It can be about support for psychological problems, but also financial support, support for studies, health care, youth information services, etc. The information we provide them can be about different subjects, for example drug (ab)use, divorce, sexuality and relationships.

Jong & Van Zin

“In Petto” is a youth information and prevention service. It is a youth service covering the whole of Flanders and is recognised by the Youth Work Department of the Ministry of the Flemish Community. We work closely together with the Youth Advice Centres (JACs) and youth work practice. In Petto is specialised in youth information and prevention, with a particular focus on peer education.

In December 2013, In Petto will merge with two other partners in Flemish youth work: “Zin-d’erin(g)” and “Jeugd en Seksualiteit”.¹ Together we will become “Jong & Van Zin”, a training organisation for children, youngsters and intermediaries (for example, trainers, youth leaders or educators). We will produce informational products, with and for children, young people and youth workers or other intermediaries. In addition to this, we’ll focus on developing educational games, training programmes on specific topics (like resilience, communication, group dynamics, sexuality and relationships, etc.) and facilitating participative processes and peer support. Our main focus is to empower children, young people and their trainers, to be stronger and more resilient in their daily lives. In our work, we always take young people’s experiences and opinions as the starting point.

1. Zin-d’erin(g) and Jeugd en Seksualiteit are two Flemish organisations that are active in Flemish youth work. Zin-d’erin(g) is specialised in interactive training courses (on several topics) with young people and in non-formal education. Jeugd en Seksualiteit is specialised in training and informational courses about sexuality, relationships and different topics related to this.



Thanks and acknowledgement

Jong & Van Zin believes strongly in the importance of acknowledgement. This is why we organise a thank you weekend for our Youth Advisors every year. When organising this weekend, we work closely with a small group of Youth Advisors. In fact, this core group organises the event, with our help and support. During this weekend, the Youth Advisors meet each other and they can do things together in a group. We reward them for their commitment with training courses on several topics. We pay attention to group dynamics, information about sexuality and relationships, drugs, friendship and more. In addition to the weekend, we try to give our Youth Advisors as many opportunities as possible. They get the chance to participate in Yintro training courses (on youth information and counselling work, prepared by ERYICA) and in international projects for youth ambassadors for youth information. In this way, we hope to give them the opportunity to be engaged in a broader area than only the Flemish context.

An example to clarify the concept

Lisa's parents are going through a divorce. Lisa is struggling with her loyalty towards both parents. She lives with her mother and misses her dad. She hesitates to show those feelings to her mother. Luckily she can talk about all this with Nora, a friend from school and a Youth Advisor. Nora listens and helps Lisa to find a way to deal with the situation. After a while Nora doesn't really know what to do to help Lisa anymore, so she goes to the JAC for advice. The social worker, whom Nora knows well from Youth Advisor training, gives her some tips to help Lisa. With this assistance, and with her own skills, Nora succeeds in helping Lisa with her problems. Nora also learnt in her training to notice signals which indicate "Lisa needs professional help". In that case, Nora won't hesitate to advise her friend about professional support.

Youth Advisors in the future

At this moment, Jong & Van Zin is extending the Youth Advisor concept to other sectors, like education, youth work and youth at risk. We believe this project will be highly valuable in these settings. Overall, we think it's important to underline that Youth Advisors aren't "mini-social workers". They are trained to be "a good friend" who knows where to find support and advice when needed.



DORIEN, 24:

Peer-to-peer is very important I think. Youngsters go most of the time to their friends when they have questions or problems. Since I did the project, I know better how to help my friends. It makes it easier for them to go to the youth information centre.

DORIEN, 24:

DORTEN, 24:
My experience: fun, part of an awesome group,
feeling of trust, peers, dealing with issues in a
non-formal way, learning from others, nobody
judges you, connected with each other... it's just
an amazing experience that I'm glad to be part of!

LISE, 22:

Being a Youth Advisor is an opportunity and a learning experience I recommend it to all young people who care for their friends and want to expand their horizons in helping others. Not only is it something you take with you for the rest of your life, it can also be of great use to the professionals who might lose touch with the day-to-day environment young people live in. Youth Advisors are an excellent asset to any YIC, connected to their peers and if allowed, they can function as a perfect connection between professionals and the young people who are not able to speak out.

JOLIEN, 19:

JOLIEEN, 19:
They call it Youth Advisors, but actually it's just being who you've always been. You just keep on being yourself, and you make sure you're there when others need you. Nobody expects you to be able to solve all problems of your peers, but just listening to them can be a big help. In the training for Youth Advisor, I realised how big my influence can be by just listening to my friends and by being who I am.

TOM, 18:

Since I did the course,
I always know where to go
when I need someone to
talk to. These new friends
are always nice.
And everyone knows that
it's always nice to be nice!

ROBIV, 21:

LAURENCE, 19:

Since I became a Youth Advisor, I feel like I understand my friends better and I'm able to help them easier. They also ask for my help more easily than before.