



Paula Barrett
FRIENDS Resilience Organisation
PO Box 5699, West End, Qld 4101 Australia
director@friendsresilience.org
www.friendsresilience.org

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MY FRIENDS YOUTH Program - Intervention content

The goal of the My FRIENDS Youth Program is to treat and prevent anxiety and depression in adolescents, as well as promote emotional resilience through the development of social and emotional skills.

The newest edition of My FRIENDS Youth has a stronger focus on mindfulness, attention training, values based role models and support networks, along with giving back to the community.

Participants are asked to identify role models in their family and local community, to demonstrate the values of empathy, kindness, positive thinking and the confidence to face challenges.

This edition also incorporates self-directed learning and the stages of moral development. Specifically, youth learn how their beliefs, values and behavioural choices are connected to their stages of moral development.

Below, we describe in more detail how the intervention content addresses the specific elements.

Emotion regulation

Emotion regulation is one of the core components of this intervention and is addressed in a number of sessions throughout the program. Discussion of emotional regulation begins by helping to increase participant awareness of feelings and the connection between feelings and the body (session 2). In the second session participants also learn how to regulate feelings effectively. Regarding emotion regulation, session 5 focuses on teaching participants about thoughts, and the relationship between thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Session 5 and 6 focus on attention training and how participants can practice paying attention to personal helpful cues in the environment. Session 6 teaches participants to reflect on their thoughts, and ways they can challenge them to find helpful strategies. Session 9 teaches about the importance of self-care to promote effective emotion regulation. Mindfulness exercises are practiced throughout the program.

Interpersonal skills

Starting with the second session, participants are encouraged to reflect and discuss interpersonal skills and to practice empathy. The third session focuses on discussions about friendship-building skills (e.g. qualities of a good friend). Session 9 encourages participants to reflect on leadership skills for peace making and participants are also taught conflict resolution strategies. It also encourages participants to discuss how to manage bullying. Session 10 invites participants to reflect and discuss how they can actively help their school, family, and community.



Problem-solving skills

Session 1 encourages participants to reflect on past success and increases awareness of their ability to problem solve. In sessions 7 and 8, participants are taught various problem-solving strategies to help them cope with various challenges (individually and in groups). These skills are also addressed in remaining sessions. In every session, participants are encouraged to reflect on challenging situations and how to cope with similar situations in the future.

Stress management skills or mindfulness approaches

Self-regulation strategies and mindfulness exercises are taught and encouraged to be practiced in every session (e.g., session 4 teaches mindful eating, progressive muscular relaxation, and breathing exercise).

Alcohol or drug use education

Healthy lifestyle choices are encouraged in every session (e.g., information about healthy eating, suggestions for being active, required rest and sleep for this age group education are provided in every session). The program has flexibility in terms of the activities that are relevant for particular populations; therefore, alcohol and/or drug use education can be incorporated as needed.

Intervention delivery considerations

Platforms used

The format of the FRIENDS program includes large and small face-to-face group work, role-plays, interactive activities and exercises, games, YouTube videos, story telling, artwork, and quizzes. At the end of each session, participants are given homework to be discussed at the beginning of the subsequent session. For optimum effectiveness, it is recommended the FRIENDS program is delivered either as 10 weekly sessions of 1 hour (over one term), or 20 weekly sessions of 30 minutes (over 2 terms), plus two booster sessions. The FRIENDS resilience programs have shown robust outcomes independent of delivery modality.

Delivery of the program is supported by the recent adoption of a secure digital platform. The Friends Resilience Hub website enables universal access, and immediate availability of digital versions of the training and course material.

The digital materials are available for group facilitators/trainers that deliver the courses and the participants undertaking the programs. The digital material includes electronic versions of:

- Participant activity books (e-books)
- Facilitator manuals for delivering the program (e-books)
- Online training (including videos and quiz) for certification of the facilitators delivering the programs
- Digital resources to support the delivery of the programs including a growing list of posters, activities, games, videos, web links, supporting school and parent information, recommended book titles and background research material
- Resources for parents and carers including psycho education and behaviour management skills powerpoints
- Training resources for facilitators learning the skills to deliver the programs



- Learning and Skills Management platform for:
 - Managing the organisations involved in delivering and participating in the programs
 - Account management for facilitators and participants, and
 - Course management for delivering the program, and accessing the digital materials

The course participants are able to draw and write their notes and thoughts into the activity books, which remain personal and confidential to the participant. This not only supports the participant to acquire the resilience skills, but also provides a lasting reference for their review, reflection and longer-term sustainability.

As a digital platform, Friends Resilience is also undertaking a continued evolution to a richer media and interactive experience, making the Friends Programs even more in tune with many children, youth and adults.

Universal Community Approach

People of all ages and backgrounds, can benefit from learning social and emotional resilience skills. We therefore recommend adopting a universal, community wide approach, whereby, training and delivery of the programs is not limited to identified youth, but instead also extended to include parents, grandparents and relevant members of the local community. This helps to create a culture of resilience through collaboration with the community.

Overall a universal, community approach not only offers the best outcomes but also helps to ensure the long-term sustainability of the FRIENDS Programs within the relevant culture and community.

Training and supervision methods and requirements

Minimum qualification required to be trained to deliver the intervention

My FRIENDS Youth program facilitators can be qualified school teachers, social workers or other allied health professionals (e.g., nurses or psychologists).

Length of the training

Group facilitators are required to complete the Adult Resilience program training prior to completing the My FRIENDS Youth program. The training can be delivered face-to-face or online and is normally delivered in a whole day (8h).

In the first stage of this training, participants undertake the Adult Resilience Program. The Adult Resilience Program is delivered in five stages over a 4 hour period and is normally delivered over a single day (e.g. trainer visiting a school and running a whole school intervention or participant joining our online sessions).

Once the first stage is completed, participants receive four hours training (face-to-face or online) to be able to deliver the My FRIENDS Youth Program with their students. There are also two parent seminars. Lesson plans are provided for the entire program and the parent seminars.



Resources needed to implement the intervention

Staff

Whole-school (universal) approach is highly encouraged to increase the likelihood the school, as a community, is speaking the 'same language'. However, the program can also be used as selective or indicated intervention. One teacher or allied health professional can deliver the program to an entire class at a time. Teacher assistants or volunteer parents can be of great assistance in the delivery of some activities in order to support participants who may have more difficulty participating in group settings.

Cost of materials (booklets, manuals, posters, take-home objects, equipment needed for intervention facilitators)

To deliver the program, the group facilitator is required to have the group leader's digital manual and each participant is required to have his or her own participant digital activity book. Packages of materials are offered on an economy of scale basis, and can be as little as AUD \$2-5 each. The shift to an online platform has allowed Friends Resilience to significantly reduce the cost of the programs.

Additional resources are suggested during the training (e.g. other books and YouTube videos can be helpful for specific topics), but these materials are not essential for the program's delivery. After a teacher, social worker or other allied health individual undertakes one of our trainings and becomes a certified FRIENDS group facilitator, they receive a login name and password to access the resources in our website with no extra cost. Further, posters, suggestion of alternative activities, and research articles are available online, and group facilitator can also contact our staff for support or questions.

Additional structural or environmental components

School bullying policies or neighbourhood green space upgrades

Participants learn conflict resolution skills and how to manage bullying in session 9. The program's activities links with educational curricula, which are organised in four interrelated elements: Self-awareness, Self-management, Social Awareness, and Social management (see Appendix A). For example, Session 9 encourages participants to reflect on leadership skills for peace making. Session 10 invites participants to reflect and discuss how they can help their school, family, and community (e.g. recycling). There is evidence suggesting that people who develop these skills are more likely to manage themselves and develop social capacities to build positive relationships and prevent bullying (Espelage, & Polanin, 2015; Smith & Low, 2013). Anecdotal data from our research shows that the program's benefits can be extended to improved positive behaviours at school.

Past Evaluations of the My FRIENDS Youth Program

The My FRIENDS Youth Program was trialled in New Zealand with year 9 students during 2013 and 2104, as part of the health and physical education curriculum. The outcomes of this trial were reported in the *"It's, like trying to make us better people" My Friends Youth (MFY) final evaluation report (2015)* – Report to the Ministry of Education, New Zealand by Jo MacDonald, Roseanna Bourke, Melanie Berg and Jacky Burgon.

Key Findings



- 62% of students thought MFY was worth doing
- **62% of Maori students and 72% of Pasifika students compared to 59% of NZ European students were more likely to agree the program was worth doing**
- **78% of teachers reported that students were more aware of their feelings as a result of the programs**
- 62% of teachers reported it helped students to know each better and fostered a sense of community
- 56% of students reported that they used the strategies learned from MFY in 'real life'
- 72% of girls and 65% of boys either agreed or strongly agreed that what they learnt would be useful in the future
- 71% of Maori students and 73% of Pasifika students agreed that what they learnt would be useful in the future, compared to 67% of NZ European students
- 78% of teachers thought MFY fitted well in their school
- 80% of teachers thought the leadership team supported the program
- 70% of teachers agreed that MFY aligned well with other initiatives or programs in the school
- **90% of teachers agreed that MFY is compatible with the NZ Curriculum key competencies and health and physical education curriculum and with their schools existing health program**
- **87% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that MFY had been worth doing**
- 77% of teachers indicated that they had used aspects of MFY in their other teaching

Wellbeing@School Survey (completed by over 2,000 year 9 students, pre and post), found:

- Pre-program: 62% of students agreed or strongly agreed that at school I am taught how to manage my feelings and post-program: 69% agreed or strongly agreed
- Pre-program: 75% of students agreed or strongly agreed that at school I am taught to think about other students' feelings and post-program: 81% agreed or strongly agreed
- Pre-program: 70% of students agreed or strongly agreed at school I am taught what to say or do if students are hassling or bullying me and post-program: 76

Cultural aspects of the intervention specific to the communities involved and Intervention adaptation – considerations for the target population and if the intervention is used in other populations

Over the last 30 years, the FRIENDS program has shown positive results in terms of decreasing participants levels of anxiety and depression, as well as increasing resilience, self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-esteem and social emotional skills (Barrett, 1998; Barrett, Farrell, Ollendick, & Dadds, 2006; Iizuka, Barret, Gillies, Cook, & Marinovic, 2015; Liddle & Macmillan, 2010, Rodgers & Dunsmuir, 2015; Rose, Miller, & Martinez, 2009; Shortt, Barrett, & Fox, 2001; Stallard, Simpson, Anderson, & Goddard, 2008; Stopa, Barrett, & Golingi, 2010, to name a few). The Programs have also been shown to improve peer relationships and positive attitudes towards learning and the school environment generally. These positive effects have been identified in many different countries worldwide: Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, Fiji, USA, Mexico, South Africa, Netherlands, Germany, Japan, Portugal, Finland, Norway, Sweden, UK, Ireland, Hong Kong, Taiwan Korea, Singapore, Denmark, Lebanon, Venezuela, Iran, Pakistan, United Arab Emirates, Puerto Rico, Chile, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia.



The theoretical model adopted for the prevention and early intervention of anxiety and depression in this program addresses attachment (emotions), physiological (body), cognitive (mind), and learning (behaviour) processes, which interact in the development, experience and maintenance of anxiety. Because the program is based on theory and empirical evidence, it is crucial that group facilitators respect the structure and sequence of the program's framework. There is space for group leaders to adapt the activities in the program according to their group needs; however, facilitators need to follow the sequence of the framework in the intended sequence (**F**eelings – **R**elaxation – **I**nnner Helpful Thoughts, **E**xplore solutions and coping step plan – **N**ow reward yourself – **D**o it every day – **S**tay strong inside), as research informs that the program is most effective when presented in this order. Having said that, it is extremely important that group facilitators consider their participants interests and abilities when planning activities targeting each aspect of the framework with meaningful activities for the participants with whom they are working. Therefore, the activities presented in the program are suggestions that have worked for many children around world, but group facilitators have flexibility do adapt them according to their needs.

It is also strongly recommended that the FRIENDS program sessions range from half an hour to an hour twice a week across two school terms in the middle of the school year. However, organisations can adjust the allocated time according to their needs/availability. Group facilitators can also repeat some sessions to go into more depth, use two lessons in a single session, and take sufficient time to maximize the participation of particular students.

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Appendix A

Links to Competencies in School Curriculum Personal & Social Capability Year 8

Self-Awareness

Recognising Emotions

School Capabilities

Skills developed via FRIENDS

Typically, by the end of Year 8 students:	
Examine influences on and consequences of their emotional responses in learning, social and work-related contexts	<p>Session 2 focuses on increasing participants' awareness of feelings and the connection between feelings and the body. It also teaches participants how to manage feelings effectively.</p> <p>Session 4 teaches self-regulation strategies (e.g. mindful eating, breathing exercise). Session 10 teaches how the brain development for this age group can impact their thoughts, feelings and behaviour.</p>

Recognising Personal Qualities and Achievements

Make a realistic assessment of their abilities and achievements, and prioritise areas for improvement	Addressed in every session.
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Understanding Themselves as Learners

Identify and choose a range of learning strategies appropriate to specific tasks and describe work practices that assist their learning	Session 5 and 6 focus on attention training and how participants can practice paying attention to personal helpful cues in the environment.
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Developing Reflective Practice

Predict the outcomes of personal and academic challenges by drawing on previous problem solving and decision-making strategies and feedback from peers and teachers	<p>Session 1 encourages participants to reflect on past success and increase awareness of their ability to problem solve.</p> <p>Every session encourages participants to reflect on challenging situations and how to cope with similar situations in the future.</p>
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Self-Management

Expressing emotions appropriately

School Capabilities	Skills developed via FRIENDS
<p>Typically, by the end of Year 8 students:</p> <p>Forecast the consequences of expressing emotions inappropriately and devise measures to regulate behaviour</p>	<p>Session 1 invites participants to learn about mindfulness. Session 2 focuses on increasing awareness of feelings and the connection between feelings and the body. It also teaches participants how to manage feelings effectively. Session 4 teaches self-regulatory strategies (e.g. mindful eating, breathing exercise). Session 9 teaches about the importance of self-care.</p>

Developing Self-Discipline and Setting Goals

<p>Select, use and analyse strategies that assist in regulating behaviour and achieving personal and learning goals</p>	<p>Session 1 encourages participants to reflect and define personal goals. Session 5 teaches participants about the influence of thoughts on feelings and behaviours, and how negative thinking patterns can be challenged. Every session encourages participants to reflect on challenging situations and how to cope with similar situations in the future.</p>
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Working Independently and Showing Initiative

<p>Critique their effectiveness in working independently by identifying enablers and barriers to achieving goals</p>	<p>Sessions 5 and 6 teach participants about the influence of thoughts on feelings and behaviours, and how negative thinking patterns can be challenged with more helpful alternatives. Every session encourages participants to reflect on challenging situations and how to cope with similar situations in the future.</p>
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Becoming Confident, Resilient and Adaptable

<p>Assess, adapt and modify personal and safety strategies and plans, and revisit tasks with renewed confidence</p>	<p>Session 5 focuses on teaching participants about thoughts, and the influence of thoughts on feelings and behaviours. Session 6 teaches participants to reflect on thoughts and ways they can challenge them to find more helpful alternatives. Every session encourages participants to reflect on challenging situations and how to cope with similar situations in the</p>
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Social Awareness

Appreciating Diverse Perspectives

School Capabilities

Skills developed via FRIENDS

Typically, by the end of Year 8 students:	
Acknowledge the values, opinions and attitudes of different groups within society and compare to their own points of view	Session 2 encourages participants to practice empathy and the following session focuses on discussions about friendship skills (e.g., qualities of a good friend).

Contributing to Civil Society

Analyse personal and social roles and responsibilities in planning and implementing ways of contributing to their communities	Session 9 encourages participants to reflect on leadership skills for peace-making. Session 10 invites participants to reflect and discuss how they can help their school, family, and community.
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Understanding Relationships

Identify indicators of possible problems in relationships in a range of social and work-related situations	Session 9 teaches conflict resolution strategies and encourages participants to discuss how to manage bullying.
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Social management

Communicating Effectively

School Capabilities

Skills developed via FRIENDS

Typically, by the end of Year 8 students:	
Analyse enablers of and barriers to effective verbal, nonverbal and digital communication	Session 2 encourages participants to reflect on different ways of communication (i.e., verbal, non-verbal, and electronic).

Working collaboratively

Assess the extent to which individual roles and responsibilities enhance group cohesion and the achievement of personal and group objectives	Session 8 teaches the importance of values based support teams and values based role models. It also encourages participants to reflect and identify support teams.
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Decision Making

Assess individual and group decision making processes in challenging situations	Sessions 7 and 8 teach different problem-solving strategies that participants can use to cope with different challenges (individually and in groups). Strategies to
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	cope with different challenges are covered from session 7 until the end of the program.
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Conflict resolution and negotiation

Assess the appropriateness of various conflict resolution strategies in a range of social and work-related situations	Session 7 and 8 teach different problem-solving strategies to cope with various challenges (individually and in groups). Strategies to cope with potential challenges to prepare for future similar situations are covered from session 7 until the end of the program. Session 9 teaches conflict resolution strategies and encourages participants to discuss how to manage bullying.
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Developing Leadership Skills

Plan school and community projects, applying effective problem-solving and team-building strategies, and making the most of available resources to achieve goals	Session 9 encourages participants to reflect on leadership skills for peacemaking. Session 10 invites participants to reflect on how they can help their school, family, and community.
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