



Life to the Max – an evaluative project

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Report Information

Prepared for Life to the Max, Whanganui

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The front cover illustration is of Whanganui Police staff and a Life to the Max group programme.

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Foreword

Life to The Max Whanganui is a child-focused youth development service that has been running in Whanganui since the early 2000s. The service supports children who are on the margins or have the potential to become engaged within the formal youth justice system.

Life to the Max's principle aim is to prevent children who have been identified as at risk of offending (or who have participated in low-level offending) progressing to more serious anti-social and illegal behaviours (Life to the Max, 2017).

The service is supported by local Police who provide premises and other resources and maintain a regular and close association through a Police Youth Aid Liaison Officer. Life to the Max also collaborates with a range of local and national agencies and services, including schools, Oranga Tamariki, regional businesses (e.g., through donation of places in group-based activities that form part of Life to the Max's specific interventions), and other relevant community groups.

Life to the Max is founded on and driven by formal social work-practices. The service is child-centred and wholistic. It uses a strengths-based, developmental and collaborative methodology of practice that focuses on helping children, and their whānau, build strategies and skills to meet their needs and achieve their goals. Their approach emphasises "partnerships with parents/caregivers and local agencies" and including whānau and the community to identify and provide solutions (Life to the Max, 2017).

There are four cornerstones around which their individual and group-based programme components are designed and delivered - Family/Whānau, Health, Education, and Community/Recreation. These cornerstones align to the key theory and practice principles outlined in an analysis of the causes and solutions to youth crime published by The Ministry of Youth Affairs (McLaren, 2000); and these findings have been broadly supported in subsequent work (Ludbrook, 2012; Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor, 2018b; Warren & Fraser, 2009).

This project

This project grew out of a desire by Life to the Max to develop an up-to-date evidence-based evaluation about the outcomes of their work for children and their whānau. Life to the Max partnered with the Knowledge Institute to re-develop their operational data collection, storage, analysis and reporting systems; and to gather feedback from past clients, whānau, caregivers and partnering organisations on the outcomes and value of their work. With the support of the Whanganui Community Foundation, the Knowledge Institute has worked alongside Life to the Max over the past 18 months to develop a theory of change that includes an outcome framework and build an evidence base that can support the work of Life to the Max.

Executive Summary

This project set out to explore the value of Life to the Max from a range of perspectives – children and whānau who have participated in the service, as well as from schools and agencies who partner and work with Life to the Max. It was also a capacity building project. We walked along side Life to the Max for over 18 months and helped them to develop their theory of change and their organisational data capture and reporting systems, to support reflective practice, organisational development and learning.

Life to the Max is a recognised and trusted organisation. It is a vital part of the community, established to address the community's needs. Their intensive, longer-term, wrap-around work with children and whānau is unique in Whanganui and highly valued.

"...such a short fall of committed Social Workers and wrap-around organisations such as Life to the Max."

The professionalism of the staff, and their experience and commitment to children and whānau stands out to those they partner and work with. Schools and agencies are confident that children will be in good hands if they refer a child and whānau to Life to the Max.

"...all of the workers are passionate about what they do..."

Life to the Max is meeting an important need in the Whanganui community providing intensive support to families and children. Life to the Max provides trusted professional support. This includes care, respect, fun, boundaries, new skills, time, guidance and encouragement. Families value this support and feel more able to create the conditions that improve their children's outcomes.

There are many positive outcomes for children

Children experience a wide range of positive outcomes as a result of their involvement with Life to the Max. Whānau, children, staff, schools and agencies told us that whilst children are in the service, they mostly 'stay out of trouble'. Police noted that many of the children who have been through Life to the Max 'stop coming to police attention'. Another agency said that after children have been to Life to the Max, they don't often see them again.

These findings were confirmed by our analysis of Life to the Max's risk profiling data of children. We found that the majority of children who Life to the Max works with reduce their risk of offending during their time with the service.

Some children felt that Life to the Max had helped them turn their lives around, preventing them from following a negative path.

"...things could have turned out bad – they've helped me keep on track..."

Children and their whānau described being able to think differently before acting since being in the service.

"...Instead of going straight off the rails, when he got upset, Life to the Max taught him to think about your actions."

"...think before do..."

Children described feeling calmer than they had previously, no longer throwing tantrums, not getting as angry or annoyed – and that this helped with their learning and relationships.

"I was calmer, it actually helped, so I would get more work done in school."

Children and their whānau noted that there were big changes in their attitudes, especially towards others. They described being more polite, kind and thoughtful as a result of taking part in Life to the Max.

"You learned how to be kind... how to speak to each other..."

Children described feeling valued, respected and most importantly, they didn't feel judged. They also described being able to make and maintain friendships, in ways they couldn't before. They talked about feeling proud of themselves for the changes they had made, and confident about their futures.

For most of the children we spoke to, they talked about how Life to the Max had also improved their engagement in learning and in school generally. For one young person, the year following Life to the Max was his first full year of being in school ever.

"There's not a day when he says he doesn't want to go to school..."

"I think being with Life to the Max taught me how to cooperate more at activities at school. That helped me to learn, to mix with other people."

Whānau and carers are also experiencing positive outcomes from Life to the Max

Whānau and carers also described positive experiences and outcomes as a result of Life to the Max. We heard stories of mothers being supported to build their self-esteem and confidence to re-enter education. We also heard of a father who with support from Life to the Max finally sought help for past trauma.

Whānau learned new ways of relating to their children and several told us that they and their families were better off as a result.

"...if it wasn't for them...probably would have gone crazy..."

Whānau told us that Life to the Max is there for parents, as well as for the children. And this makes a difference – it's certainly different to other kinds of support they have received from other agencies.

"I'd say they're quite up there, because I've had a few agencies..."

Without exception, schools, agencies and partners, as well as staff, told us that without the engagement and commitment of whānau to making changes, efforts with children are unlikely to be effective.

Life to the Max's practice model and ways of working are valued by children, whānau and agencies

The wholistic approach taken by Life to the Max, i.e., one that wraps around, and walks alongside whānau and their children, taking account of the myriad of circumstances and the range of people connected to children, is highly valued by whānau, staff, children, schools and agencies. The Life to the Max practice model is perceived as flexible and responsive. All of the staff are described as dedicated and committed to doing what they can to make a difference to the children and whānau they work with.

"...the flexibility and the commitment is there..."

"...do the grass roots social work and think outside the square for families..."

"They genuinely care – they want to help..."

Children valued feeling respected, listened to, and that they mattered to someone.

"...always respectful, knew how to associate with me...I'm not really good at associating with people..."

The combination of one-on-one time with the social workers, along with a range of social activities with other children was appreciated by all the children we spoke to. It made a difference that their siblings could be included, and that Life to the Max was prepared to support them in lots of different settings - at home, at school, participating in recreation and sport. Help with relationships, especially with their friends was welcomed by the children.

Whānau valued being included in the service, even though they all knew that their child was at the centre of the support offered by Life to the Max. For some, they told us that they really felt that Life to the Max had 'been there for them' in a way they hadn't experienced before. Most recognised that they had learned new skills and ways of relating; many had changed some of their behaviours by being involved and they felt things had improved for them and their children as a result.

"I could say whatever I was feeling and yeh... she was always there for me..."

Pressure to grow capacity

Whānau, agencies and schools all talked about their desire to see Life to the Max extend their capacity, to support children and whānau for longer when needed; to include more children in their service, because there is so much unmet need in the community. They would also like Life to the Max to develop a programme for older children and young people.

Organisational development

Life to the Max is a small organisation, with limited resources. They do a lot, with little. Given this scarcity of resources, their organisational systems have been largely paper-based and they have relied on tight knit working relationships to keep abreast of day-to-day practice and activities.

This project has worked with them to upgrade their database with new functionality and modify their pre and post evaluation tools and improve their ability to analyse and report on their practice and outcomes. This will depend on their ability and commitment to using the system regularly.

Life to the Max would benefit from additional organisational capacity, to further develop organisational systems that support ongoing, regular, systematic review of programming and social worker practice in particular.

In closing

Overall, the evidence we have collated over the past 18 months points to Life to the Max being a much needed service, that is valued by the Whanganui community and is making a positive difference to most of the children and whānau who participate.

What is Life to the Max?

The Life to the Max service is made up of a number of elements. These include:

- One-to-one support for individual children by social workers and family work is available for the entire duration of their time in the service. The social workers regularly pick up and drop off children to sports and health services, as well as attend school and agency meetings with them and their whānau.
- Whānau support for parents/caregivers, siblings and any other significant others in the whanau unit. This support is also provided for the entire duration of their time with Life to the Max. The team practices intensive social work support, working with whānau to develop their family, education, employment and wellbeing needs amongst other things. Specialist services such as counselling (MICAHAMS, AoD, Mental health, general health, Parenting programmes etc) are arranged by Life to the Max for clients to attend when it is appropriate and timely. Social workers told us that they regularly support parents by taking them to appointments, referring them to services and parenting programmes. They also guide families to problem solve, offer parenting tips, spend one-on-one time with parents, provide a listening ear, and make time and space for just talking things through.
- Trips and outings for clients and families. These are undertaken to provide children and families with opportunities, they otherwise wouldn't have, to build shared positive experiences, and develop interests. During the trips and outings social workers model and reinforce positive behaviours.
- Group programmes have been developed to support clients to learn and develop specific skills and behaviours (see table 1 below).

The kinds of support offered / undertaken include:

- School visits – each school is visited weekly to liaise with pastoral staff and clients teachers, and also any other times if matter arise that need attention
- Health checks and doctors' visits – these are arranged and children and family members are taken to appointments if necessary
- Support with meetings with Oranga Tamariki – includes Family Group Conferences and case worker liaison
- Whānau support such as parental guidance, arranging family activities, guidance towards prepping for professional services when necessary, advice and support if necessary for home life essentials such as budgeting, food management, housing needs
- Support for sport and recreation activities – One of the social workers has helped as assistant coach for a school rugby team that had Life to the Max clients and they regularly drop off or pick up children and whānau members
- General mentoring of children and whānau members as appropriate
- Role modelling
- Advocacy – this includes activities such as staff writing support letters (housing, family court, other services etc) where required. Staff will also attend school meetings such as Board of Trustee meetings for stand downs; they will accompany clients to professional appointments where necessary; they will liaise with Family Harm services if involved with the family, and any other advocacy required.

The trips and outings we heard about included:

- Lido in Palmerston North
- Laser Strike both in Palmerston North and Whanganui
- Fishing
- Horse riding
- Bowling in Palmerston North
- Go carting and mini golf at Riverland’s Family Park
- Trips to the beach
- Trips to a local park
- Golfing at Rivercity Golf driving range
- If clients have interest areas, Life to the Max will look at how they can develop these with new experiences. Examples include visits to the Police College in Porirua, the Rugby Museum, Massey University, UCOL in Palmerston North, trips to the snow, using local resources and experiences to support clients prepare for jobs they have expressed an interest in.

The specific programmes Life to the Max runs during the year for clients and their whānau is summarised in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Programmes run for clients and families

Programmes run in 2019	Who participates?	When the programme is run
Awa Trip	Girls and boys	January (during school holidays)
Boys II Men	Boys	Each term (Tuesdays)
Cared Straight	Boys	Each term (Wednesdays)
Dream Catchers	Girls	Each term
Girls to Women	Girls	Each term
Horse Riding	Girls	Each term
Mahi Taonga / horse riding	Boys	Each term (Thursdays)
Navigators	Boys	Each term (Fridays)
Shining Stars	Girls	Each term
Remove and renew	Whānau	Only when required

The clients of Life to the Max are mostly children between 9 and 12 years old, Māori and male

Over 70% of clients are aged 9-12 years on admission to the service¹. Over 60% of Life to the Max clients are Māori and the majority of Life to the Max's clients are male?

Figure 1: Age at admission to Life to the Max

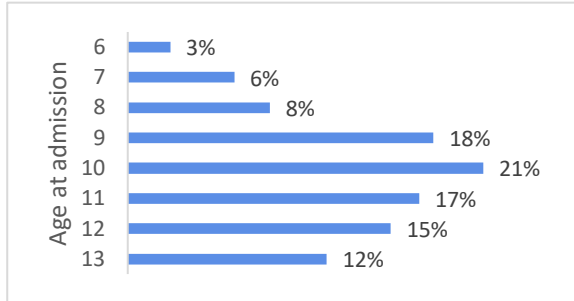


Figure 2: Ethnicity of Life to the Max clients

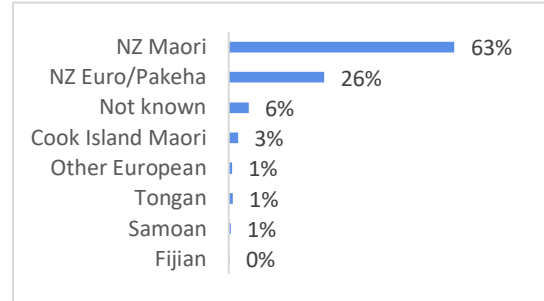
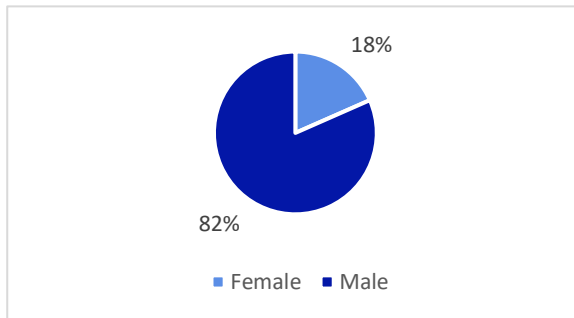


Figure 3: Gender of Life to the Max clients



Programme referrals come from across the community for a wide variety of reasons

"Life to the Max do what they say they do."

Over the past 12 years – the average number of clients and their whānau in the service is 26. From year-to-year, this number has ranged from 20 to over 30. Since 2008, on average 70% of referrals are accepted into the service.

The top referral reason for a client is that they can't manage their feelings (50%). Other prominent reasons for referral include being anti-social (43%), being impulsive (39%) or aggressive (38%), coming to attention at school (37%), and not being able to concentrate (37%). There are many other reasons for referral to Life to the Max, including children not

¹The operational data used in this report about clients and referrals is for the period 2008 to 2019.

feeling good about themselves, being anti-social, or a bully, not being able to make friends or it could be a combination of reasons.

Agencies told us that the most common reason they refer children to Life to the Max is for behavioural issues.

"It's always behaviour in some way, anti-social behaviour in some way."

The largest number of clients are referred by Oranga Tamariki, with local schools also commonly referring clients. Other referrals come from Police, social workers in schools, as well from the community.

"...workers are people that we relate to well because they know our work and we know what they're trying to do in the community."

There are a large number of siblings of clients who also participate in the service. For example, of 39 clients in the service between November 2018 and November 2019, there were 41 siblings of these clients who also participated.

Governance, management and staff of Life to the Max

The organisation has five full time staff. A Service Manager, a Finance Officer, two Social Workers and a Family Support Worker. There was a third social worker for most of 2019 who has taken up a new position closer to their home.

Most years, Life to the Max has a Social Work Degree student join them from Massey University for three months of the year.

Life to the Max has an eight-person board chaired by Judge Lance Rowe. The Trustees experience that they bring to the Trust is extensive. Along with the Chairperson's legal experience, the Board also has an accountant who is a Whanganui District Council Councillor, the Whanganui Area Police Manager, a school principal, Regional Health Network staff member, Women's Network Manager, Sport Whanganui staff member and another Whanganui District Council staff member. The chairperson and accountant are founding members of the Board along with three others who have been Trustees for many years also.

Project background

Life to the Max has been a part of the Whanganui community for nearly 20 years. Their model of practice and their theory of change has continually developed over the years.

They are committed to improving the chances of children and their whānau in their community, to have a better life, and to prevent them from entering the justice system.

Part of this commitment for Life to the Max means being open to putting their model and practice under scrutiny – to reality testing. They want to really know if what they are doing is making a difference, and also what it is that makes the difference for the children and the whānau they work with.

This project was developed to support this aim. The project set out to support Life to the Max to do three things:

- To document their working model, philosophies of practice and theory of change
- Re-develop their internal, day-to-day data collection and analysis
- Gather evidence about the outcomes and the things that made a difference for children and whānau who participate in Life to the Max.

Project methodology

This is an evaluation project, so it is grounded in evaluative thinking and practice². In this instance, this meant there was a focus on uncovering what is valuable and important about Life to the Max, from a range of perspectives to guide ongoing service/programme development and improvement. The project's purpose was also to build the capacity of Life to the Max. A core principle guiding the project methodology used was that the evaluation process should affirm and build on the experience and expertise of Life to the Max.

The design and implementation of the project were collaborative, with the Life to the Max and the Knowledge Institute teams working alongside each other throughout. Over 18 months, we have attended meetings, observed daily practice, taken notes, had lengthy discussions, reflected and workshopped with Life to the Max staff. Our role as evaluators has been to:

- support Life to the Max to increase their access to, and use of multiple kinds of evidence
- weigh up and synthesise multiple sources of evidence about the practice and outcomes of Life to the Max, balancing our independence and engagement
- develop a coherent account of what is valuable about Life to the Max, and what is important to develop and improve upon.

² Schwandt, T. (2015) *Evaluation Foundations Revisited: Cultivating a Life of the Mind for Practice*. Stanford University Press. <http://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=23317>

Developing the Theory of Change

The development of a theory of change is widely understood to support people explain how a suite of activities and processes is thought to lead to change for people (or the environment). They typically lay out the underlying theories people have about how change comes about, in a particular context³. Theories of change are also often used to support the design of research and evaluation. They support the development of key evaluation questions, decisions about what data to collect, as well as programming decisions about what might lead to better results.

We worked collaboratively with Life to the Max to develop their theory of change. A series of hui were held with Life to the Max in 2018 and 2019, in Whanganui, to develop a working theory of change.

The process included the preparation of a brief literature precis of recent literature that pertained to Life to the Max's work, to inform the theory of change⁴. The theory of change developed is illustrated below.

The Life to the Max theory of change is made up of three broad components:

- Core aspects of their delivery philosophy. These are grounded in social work theory, practice and research, as demonstrated below in Table 2 below.
- A suite of beliefs about their 'ways of operating' that influence the reasoning and behaviour of children and their whānau⁵. See Table 2 below.
- Outcomes that the service hopes to contribute towards for children, whānau, schools and the wider community.

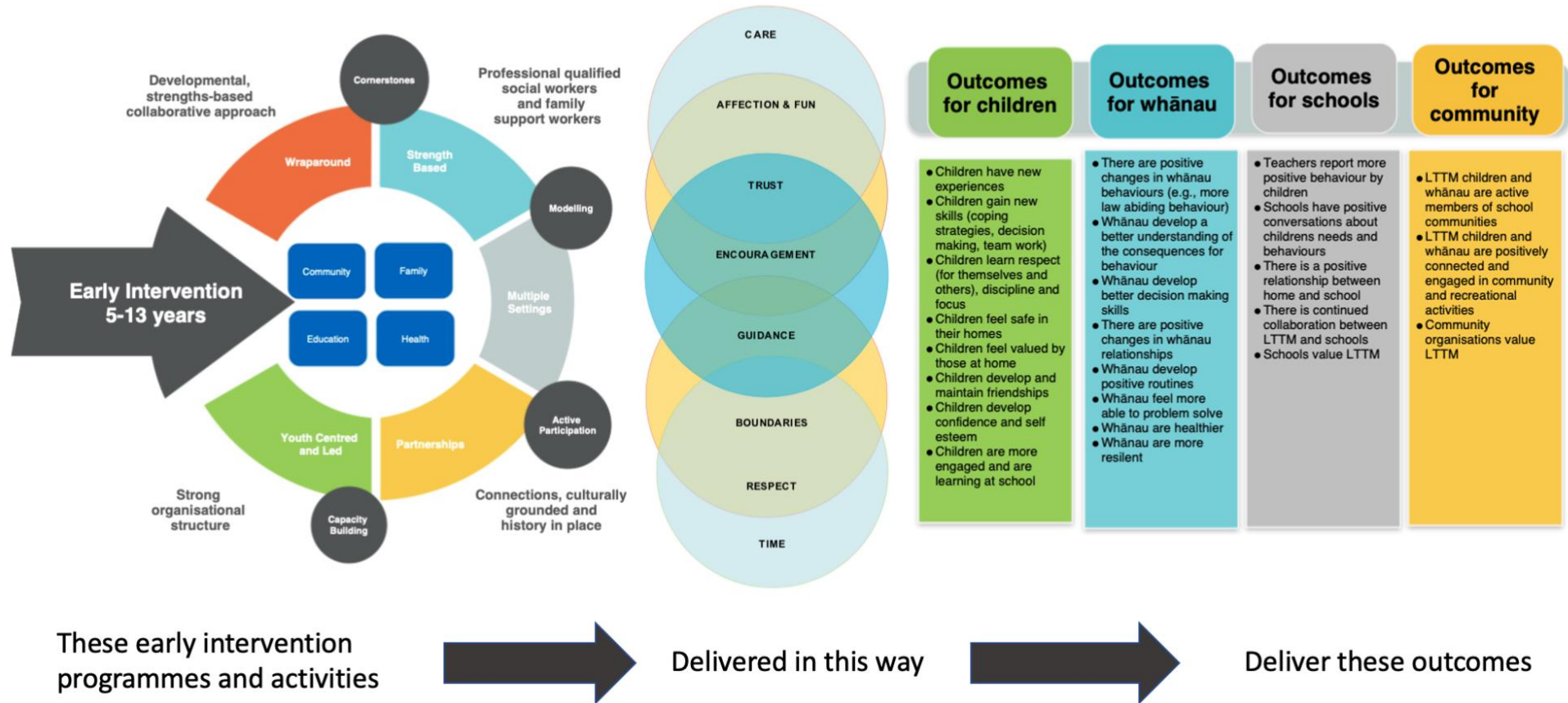
³ Rogers, P. (2014). Theory of Change, Methodological Briefs: Impact Evaluation 2, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence

⁴ See appendix 1 for the literature precis

⁵ See Westhorp, G. (in press), Using complexity consistent theory when evaluating complex systems and Pawson, R., and Tilley, N. (1997) Realistic Evaluation. SAGE.

Figure 4: Theory of Change - Life to the Max

Life To The Max – Theory of Change



The elements of Life to the Max's delivery philosophy

The activities and approach used by Life to the Max in the design and delivery of its work with children and whānau are grounded in a philosophy made up of nine elements. These delivery elements and the philosophy that underpins the Life to the Max model is outlined in Table 2 below. These are discussed in more depth in the literature precis in Appendix 1.

Table 2: Delivery elements and philosophy of Life to the Max

Elements	Brief summary of supporting reasoning
Wraparound	<p>Life to the Max specifically follows a wraparound, wholistic model of practice. Wraparound is a “comprehensive, wholistic, and youth and family-driven” process for working with children in need of care or support (National Wraparound Initiative, 2018).</p> <p>The central motivation behind the growth of wraparound was to shift youth care from being driven by what support providers wanted from children, to a process centred around what children and whānau themselves needed to develop and thrive (See youth centred below).</p> <p>Shailer and colleagues’ (2017) recently undertook just such work in their investigation of wraparound implementation in a New Zealand context, finding overall support for its use.</p>
Strength-based	<p>Contemporary rehabilitation and youth work strategies commonly emphasise strength-based approaches (Case & Morris, 2018; Fortune, 2018; Ludbrook, 2012), and such approaches are similarly integral to many wraparound implementations. The strength-based approach explicitly aims to develop skills and coping strategies in clients - that is, demonstrating to and teaching client’s practical methods and responses for dealing with situations, thoughts, and emotions they will encounter in their everyday lives</p>
Multiple Settings	<p>Most benefits can be achieved by working with children across multiple settings using multiple techniques.</p>
Partnerships	<p>The Life to the Max philosophy of practice, and the design and implementation of their programmes, emphasises “partnerships with parents/caregivers and local agencies” and the inclusion of whānau and the community in solutions provision</p>
Youth Centred and Led	<p>Life to the Max assert their service explicitly centres children as principal clients, directly includes siblings and caregivers in relevant intervention components, maintains clients in their home environments, and purposefully incorporates familiar contexts such as schools and local communities.</p>
Modelling	<p>Suggested as an effective early intervention approach by McLaren (2000), e.g., having children interact with staff engaging in positive behaviours.</p>

Active Participation	Encouraging active participation of both clients and providers is a fundamental aspect of wraparound, strength-based approaches. Practitioners and organisations who apply this approach are general supportive of their use (e.g., Fortune, 2018; National Wraparound Initiative, 2018; Vandevelde, et al., 2017).
Capacity Building	Some of the current practice of Life to the Max and moves to explore and encourage meaningful co-development of programmes in youth work more generally, are gaining prominence. Co-development involves clients and partners becoming involved in the design, assessment, and evaluation of programmes themselves (Marriott, 2017; NSW Government, 2018; Ramey & Lawford, 2018).
Cornerstones	Key ideas surfaced in an analysis of the causes and solutions to youth crime published by The Ministry of Youth Affairs (McLaren, 2000) and that have been broadly supported in subsequent work. The Life to the Max four cornerstones reflect a synthesis of the risk areas and solutions noted by McLaren and others, adapted to suit the available resources, capacity, and the particular life contexts of their target clients

Life to the Max’s ‘ways of operating’

Life to the Max have a firm belief that what matters is not just what they offer (such as the range of activities and different programme options) but how they work with children and their whānau – their ‘ways of operating’ – and being in relationship that create the conditions for outcomes to occur. This reasoning is consistent with a realist perspective, that it is “...the interaction between what the programme provides and the reasoning of its intended target population that causes the outcomes”⁶(Westhorp 2014).

It is the ‘ways of operating’, within the interactions and relationships between Life to the Max staff, social workers and family support worker and the children and whānau that create the conditions for change. The Life to the Max ‘ways of operating’ influences a flow of reasoning and feeling by children and their whānau. This helps them to think and behave differently and are therefore integral to achieving the desired outcomes.

Table 3: Elements of Life to the Max’s ways of operating

Life to the Max ‘ways of operating’	Brief summary of supporting reasoning
Care	Feeling cared for and loved is known to be a powerful driver of brain development. There is growing recognition that feeling cared for is also a powerful motivator for positive change. Studies show that feeling cared for buffers against stress, increases positive emotions, promotes resilience and increases trust and caring for others.

⁶ Westhorp, G. (2014) Realist Impact Evaluation, an introduction. A Methods Lab Publication. ODI Research and Policy Development and Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Affection and fun	Affection can make children emotionally happier, less fearful and free of stress. Affection has also been found to influence positive brain development and memory, mental well-being and well as physical health in children. Helps your child’s mental well-being.
Trust	To develop and sustain inviting relationships requires the time and effort to establish trustworthy patterns of interaction. Engaging and listening deeply over time are vital to people seeing the worth in a relationship ⁷ .
Encouragement	With encouragement, children and children can become self-motivated. Children who are self-motivated have better mental health and wellbeing than those who rely on being rewarded by others to feel good about themselves.
Guidance	Guidance is needed for development of abilities and skills facilitating learning and achievement, and habits and skills for lifelong learning. Guidance helps children understand themselves, their talents and abilities as well as their potentialities and limitations.
Boundaries	Accountability such as setting boundaries and encouraging responsibility for behaviour has been found to be an important component of effective early interventions that prevent offending (McLaren 2000). ⁸ It is through experiencing the consequences of boundary setting and breaking that children develop a stronger sense of discipline and focus in their behaviour.
Respect	People are able, valuable, and responsible and should be treated accordingly. An indispensable element in any human encounter is shared responsibility based on mutual respect. This respect is manifested in the caring and appropriate behaviours exhibited by people as well as the places, policies, programs, and processes they create and maintain. It is also manifested by establishing positions of equality and shared power.
Time	It is acknowledged by many that the development of a quality trusted relationship between a young person and a professional takes time. It takes time to develop trust, and trust is a vital ingredient for successful outcomes.

Outcomes Life to the Max hopes to influence

Life to the Max’s primary purpose is to reduce the risk of future offending for those children referred to them who have a high predicted risk profile.

To achieve this longer-term outcome, the social workers work with the children accepted into the service and their whanau and/ or caregivers to address those risk factors and behaviours, to gain some control back of their lives.

⁷ David H. Maister, Charles H. Green & Robert M. Galford (2004) *The Trusted Advisor*. Free Press, New York.

⁸ See McLaren, K. L. (2000). *Tough is not Enough - Getting Smart about Youth Crime*. Ministry of Youth Affairs. Wellington, New Zealand.

There are a broad set of immediate and medium-term outcomes for children, whānau, for schools and the community they live and work in that Life to the Max works directly to influence. These are outlined in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Life to the Max's theory of change outcomes

For children	For whānau	For schools	For the community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • children have new experiences • children gain new skills (coping strategies, decision making, teamwork) • children learn respect (for themselves and others), discipline and focus • children feel safe in their homes • children feel valued by those at home • children develop and maintain friendships • children develop confidence and self esteem • children are more engaged and are learning at school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are positive changes in whānau behaviours • whānau develop a better understanding of the consequences for behaviour • whānau develop better decision-making skills • there are positive changes in whānau relationships • whānau develop positive routines • whānau feel more able to problem solve • whānau are healthier • whānau are more resilient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers report more positive behaviour by children • Schools have positive conversations about children's needs and behaviours • There is a positive relationship between home and school • There is a continued collaboration between Life to the Max and schools • Schools value Life to the Max 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life to the Max children and whānau are active members of school communities • Life to the Max children and whānau are positively connected and engaged in community and recreational activities • Community organisations value Life to the Max

Re-development of Life to the Max's day-to-day data collection and analysis

Much of the organisational knowledge and history is held in hard-copy files. A review of the organisational documentation led to a decision to include the redevelopment of the Life to the Max database as a key part of the evaluative work. It was agreed that this would be a significant capacity building process for the organisation.

During 2019, the database used by Life to the Max was significantly re-developed. This was done so that a broader range of activities, events and outcomes could be recorded, and a more extensive range of reporting options could also be undertaken.

The first phase involved designing the new elements of the database. The existing database was upgraded to a new version of the software as part of this phase.

All the existing data was retained, although a significant amount of tidying and recoding of this data was undertaken to make it more consistent and easier to report on.

One of the new features of the database is the ability for Life to the Max to enter goals, plans, actions taken, and outcomes achieved. A further new option developed was the ability to record child and whānau entry and exit survey responses in the database.

Redevelopment of child and whānau entry and exit surveys

Following the development of the service's theory of change, it was agreed that we would support Life to the Max to re-develop new entry and exit interview surveys for children and whānau. The previous surveys were considered out of date by staff, not youth or whānau friendly and they were not being used by social workers to inform practice learning and improvement.

These surveys were redeveloped collaboratively in face-to-face hui throughout 2019. The revised surveys are now embedded in the new database, and in time, there should be data available for analysis on changes as perceived by children and their whānau, in the time between their entry and exit of the service.

Qualitative interviews with children, their whānau and other stakeholders

In depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with 11 children and their whānau (or caregivers). One phone interview was conducted with one other family member. A further six in-depth phone interviews were conducted with individuals in partnering agencies and schools.

The selection of the children to be interviewed was done by Life to the Max after discussion with our team about the importance of achieving a sample for interviewing that has a good mix of gender, age, ethnicity, as well as time since completion.

Similarly, Life to the Max provided a sample of key individuals from a range of agencies and organisations for the team to interview.

These interviews were conducted to explore the propositions in the theory of change, for plausibility of the theory of change, in particular the 'ways of working' elements and some of the outcome components of the theory of change (particularly those for children and whānau).

Although the number of interviews is small, the qualitative component was not designed to be exhaustive or representative. Rather it was designed to explore and take an in-depth approach to identify evidence that might support or refute the theory of change.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Notes were also taken during the interviews. Each young person was offered a \$20 Warehouse voucher and the family was offered a \$30 supermarket voucher. Transport to and from the interview venue was arranged by Life to the Max.

The qualitative component received ethics approval by the New Zealand Ethics Council.

The interviews were analysed and coded using MAXQDA software.

Findings

What outcomes do children experience as a result of participating in Life to the Max?



A key purpose of the interviewing process was to explore the contribution and influence of Life to the Max to changes and outcomes for children and their whānau. In addition, the redevelopment of the Life to the Max database was undertaken so that outcomes for children could be more easily reported on. This section details the outcomes we heard children, whānau and caregivers describe and attribute to their time with Life to the Max. It also summarises the outcome data for children that Life to the Max is now able to report on.

Increased confidence and self-esteem

"...it made me have more confidence and feel brave about my-self..."

The fun activities that Life to the Max offers provide children with a whole range of **new experiences**, where they learn about themselves, push boundaries, **gain confidence and self-belief**.

Most of the children talked about having **gained confidence** in themselves as a result of participating in the service. And many of the whānau and caregivers agreed that this was something they had also noticed.

"I think she has blossomed..."

"...he's done really well... doesn't hide in his hoody any more..."

Schools also talked about the changes they saw in increased confidence and self-belief that children seem to gain while they are with the service.

"I can see changes when they are here..."

New skills

Life to the Max helped all the children we talked to develop a range of **new skills**. These included such things as learning new ways to deal with being bullied, or situations where other children are being mean or hurtful.

"Well they've told us... if someone's mean to you, you say something nice... they don't know what to say... it's sort of like magic..."

These new skills were often learned through the **modelling of different behaviours** by the Life to the Max team. Several children described how they had seen a staff member demonstrate how to behave differently, and they had then applied this new behaviour subsequently.

"...when you're in a bad position – able to fix it easier... good role models..."

Other skills we heard the children say they learned included learning how to be kind, how to be a good person, the difference between right and wrong, as well as general **life skills** such as personal hygiene and personal care.

Schools also talked about a range of new skills that children learn while they are with Life to the Max. These included things like self-management which helped children to cope with anxiety.

Many of the children spoke about **feeling calmer**, less likely to react badly to situations, as well as being less anxious generally.

"A good day is when I wake up and I feel calm..."

"...just like I don't get really annoyed, as much as I did before..."

Making and maintaining friends

One of the other important outcomes that children talked about was being able to **make and maintain friends**.

"I found it easier to make friends..."

"...it built her confidence... easier to make friends with people – I've kept three of my friendships. It was harder before..."

Agencies and schools told us that many of the children they refer have trouble socialising with other children. Through the programmes and activities that children do with Life to the Max, they learn the skills of positive social interaction. And for many of the children this has made a real difference in their lives. Schools also confirmed that children develop positive peer connections during their time with Life to the Max.

"I think being with Life to the Max taught me how to cooperate more ... That helped me to learn, to mix with other people"

Increased engagement in education

Children, schools and whānau talked about the difference Life to the Max had made to their schooling experiences. Almost all the children described having difficulties at school when they began Life to the Max, and most of them felt they had made gains during their time in the service.

"I was basically getting sent home from school every-day – for disrupting the class... After – still disrupting the class – but not as often..."

"...he's still in school, that's the main thing. We've had a couple of problems, but minor, he's still at school, and that's a blessing."

Some children had quite large shifts in terms of engagement in learning and education. For example, one child described always being angry, lying and stealing, as well as being violent with other children, and now this child says they are happy at school, have friends and they are doing well academically. Another child talked about being absent from school a lot, getting into fights with other children before Life to the Max. Since finishing with the service, this child is now attending school every day, has got involved in sports and is relating better with other children.

Schools, agencies and caregivers agreed that changes in children's behaviours at school were strongly dependent on working with all the whānau; and working only with the child often wasn't enough to make a real difference because of the whānau context. Most agencies commented on the wholistic and intensive support Life to the Max is able to provide to children and whānau, and the importance of this in achieving long term change for children.

"You can't work with a child without their families it's impossible you won't get any traction..."

Feeling safe

Some of the children told us that they felt safe when they were at Life to the Max. For some children this was because they could get away from fighting and arguments at home. For others this was because they felt when they were at Life to the Max, they weren't going to be getting into fights with others out of home.

Decreased risk of offending – outcomes

Life to the Max is ultimately seeking to reduce the chances that the children they work with will (re)offend. Many of the children they work with are referred to Life to the Max before they become involved in the 'harder' aspects of the justice system. Life to the Max for these children is a preventative step. Some children who take part have already come to the notice of Police or other aspects of the Justice system.

Life to the Max is not successful with all its clients. Some offend during their time in the service; others go on to offend later. However, our analysis of a range of data that Life to the Max collects demonstrates that for most of the children they work with, their risk of offending reduces during the course of their time in the service⁹.

Life to the Max's social workers assess the strengths and risk factors for each child and their whānau at entry and this is repeated when they complete their time in the service. The assessments are wholistic in that questions are asked about family, finances, employment, housing, relationships, alcohol and drug use, parenting, health, etc.

The assessment process has been designed to be part of the relationship building process, so it is experienced as affirming and positive by whānau and children.

In addition to the social worker led assessment process, Life the Max uses the YORST¹⁰ risk assessment for each child at entry and at exit. This assessment produces a static and dynamic score based on the New Zealand Police Youth Offending Risk Screening Tool. The intended purpose of the YORST is to identify the likelihood of recidivism in young people who have already been in contact with police.

The YORST assessment tool is based on factors that have been found to reliably predict young offenders' rate of recidivism. These factors may be one of the following:

- *static risk factors* that are historical in nature and cannot be changed through an intervention (e.g. criminal history)
- *dynamic risk factors* which can be potentially changed, for example anti-social attitudes, negative peer associations, truancy or abuse of alcohol or drugs. Dynamic factors that, if targeted through an intervention, have been shown to have a causal link with recidivism are referred to as criminogenic needs
- *protective factors* which are characteristics or conditions that interact with risk factors to moderate or reduce their influence (e.g. having pro-social peers or a positive home environment)¹¹.

The graph below shows the overall entry and exit results for Life to the Max clients from 2018 and 2019. The first two columns show the change in the Risk Score. This is the

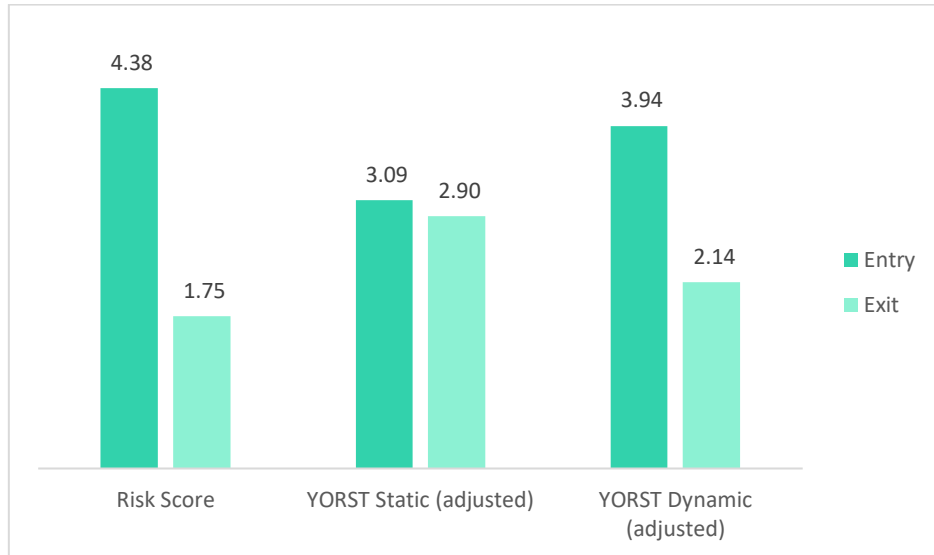
⁹ The outcome data analysis has been applied to Life to the Max clients for the years 2018 and 2019.

¹⁰ Mossman, Elaine (2016) Research to validate the New Zealand Police Youth Offending Risk Screening Tool (YORST) – Phase III FINAL REPORT, New Zealand Police

¹¹ Mossman, Elaine (2010) Research to Validate the New Zealand Police Youth Offending Risk Screening Tool (YORST) Phase I: Screening and Assessment of Young Offenders Risk of Recidivism: Literature Review. New Zealand Police.

wholistic social worker assessment done at **entry** and **exit**. The second two columns show the overall change in the static and dynamic YORST scores from entry to exit¹².

Figure 5: Life to the Max Social Worker assessment entry and exit risk scores + YORST entry and exit scores (Clients with Life to the Max 2018-2019)



This is an overall picture. Not all clients make these shifts. Social workers reported that some clients are really tough to work with, and they don't manage to achieve the goals and outcomes they set out with. However, we found that the vast majority of clients make positive shifts during their time with Life to the Max.

Addressing child needs

Our analysis of the Life to the Max database affirmed the individualised nature of the support provided to each client, to meet their specific needs. We compared the different kinds of contact recorded in their system for a range of children in the past two years. No two children had the same pattern of contacts. Some had more home visits than others, lots of school visits were recorded for some children, whilst for others, there were fewer. All children had considerable one-to-one time recorded in the database, but family time varied, as did time spent with agencies.

Life to the Max also asks children and whānau to complete a survey at the beginning and end of their time in the service. The entry surveys ask about a range of needs they perceive they might have. For children these are such things as relationships with parents, support making their whānau stronger, help with siblings and other whānau, help at school, their own behaviour, help with friends, health and hygiene, sports, drugs and alcohol.

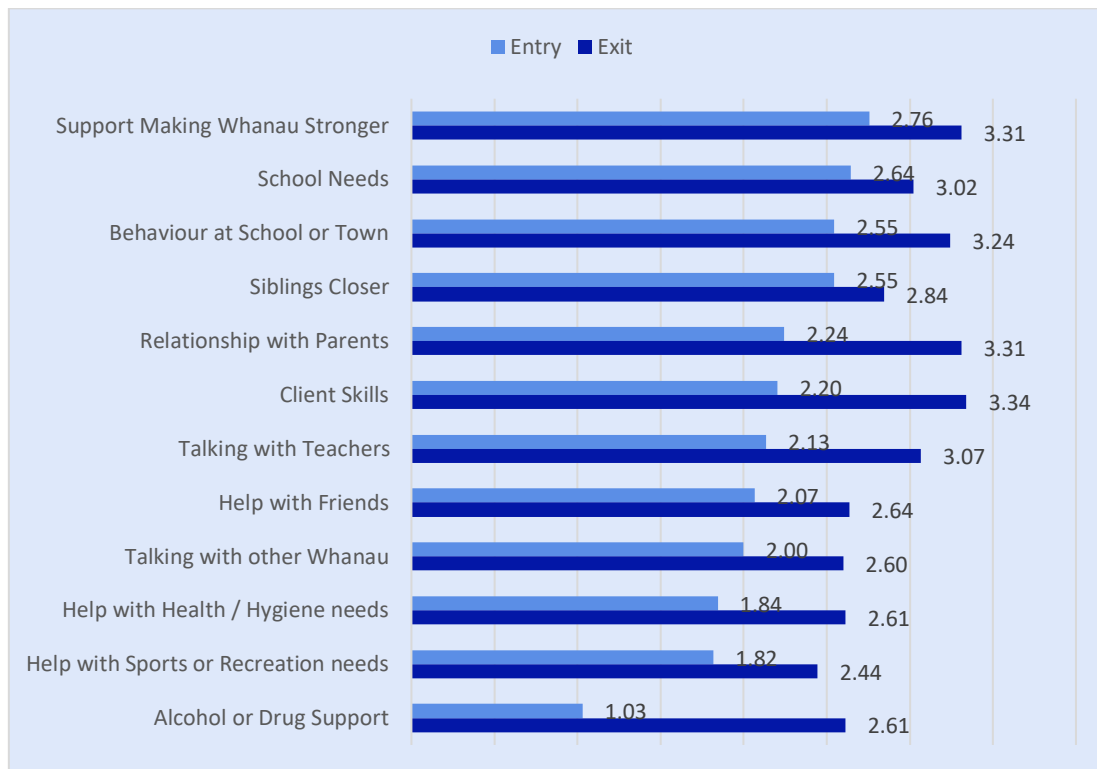
The exit survey for children asks how much Life to the Max addressed these needs. These surveys have been now been redeveloped as part of the evaluation process. The data we report on here uses the survey responses of clients for 2018 and 2019.

¹² The YORST scores have been adjusted to be able to be graphed on the same axis as the social worker assessment scores. The actual YORST scores were as follows: Entry Static = 30.9; Exit Static = 29.0. Entry Dynamic = 39.4 and Exit Dynamic = 21.4.

The pre and post surveys have been redesigned as part of the evaluation process. It will be at least a year before there will be sufficient data for reporting using the new pre and post questions.

Figure 6 below shows that clients perceived the help provided by Life to the Max was greater, in all instances, than the need they perceived they had at the outset.

Figure 6: Life to the Max Client Pre and Post Interview Scores (Average scores overall for clients with Life to the Max 2018-2019)



The interview data confirms these results, with all the children reporting positive experiences and outcomes from their time with Life to the Max. When asked what they would tell someone else about Life to the Max, children said things like, “it will be fun, you get to make friends and feel confident.”

“I’d say it’s good, they don’t get mad and you get to do fun stuff...”

In summary

Overall, most children are benefiting from their time with Life to the Max. The operational data provides evidence that the nature of the work being done with clients is tailored and individualised to meet the specific needs of children, and children’s feedback confirms that they feel their needs were addressed by their time with the service. The Life to the Max social worker assessment data shows positive shifts in the risk profiles of children are occurring over the course of their time with Life to the Max. The narratives we heard from children about the outcomes they experienced align closely with the theory of change outcomes, affirming the narratives of staff who helped develop the theory of change.

What outcomes do whānau and caregivers experience as a result of participating in Life to the Max?



In this section we outline the outcomes for whānau and caregivers we heard being described by children, whānau and caregivers themselves well as other stakeholders that they attribute to Life to the Max. We also present a summary of the pre and post survey data that Life to the Max collects from whānau and caregivers.

“They’ve had a massive impact on our family... I think I do approach things differently... speaking to them like they are adults... just picked it up over the last year...”

Positive changes in whānau behaviours

Although the children are the primary clients of the service, Life to the Max also spends considerable amounts of time with the whānau and caregivers, supporting them to find ways to better manage their own behaviours, as well as those of their children.

Schools told us that the engagement of whānau is considered to be one of the strengths of Life to the Max.

“Where whānau become open, it can become transformative. That is a huge piece of the puzzle...”

Some of the behaviours whānau and carers talked about changing included, having increased patience with their children, talking more calmly to children, treating children more like adults.

“They did teach me try to have some patience with them...”

"I used to be quite grumpy and yell and scream at them... they hear me better when I talk to them nicely..."

Whānau and carers commented that they felt better about themselves as a result, and that they felt there was more respect amongst each other.

Whānau develop an understanding of the consequences of their behaviour

Whānau and caregivers told us that they were supported to reflect and look at their behaviours, and some talked about realising that their previous interactions with their children weren't healthy. Some told us that they now realise that their behaviour was a key part of the problem for their children.

"I think they were extremely helpful. I would probably still be a shambles without them..."

Agencies and schools told us similar stories about parents coming to realise that they had to change if their child's behaviour was going to change for the better.

"The parents themselves realise that it is my problem.... I am the reason [my child] is behaving the way he is... that is where I see the big changes happen."

Several stakeholders told us that Life to the Max are adept at challenging parents when they see adult behaviour affecting the children. Life to the Max are 'straight up' in a way that seems to resonate with whānau.

"I've seen the parents being challenged when the kid was kicking up bobsie die... it came down to the mother doing drugs and this was affecting the kid... and [Life to the Max] got her on a programme... and the kid settled.... for a period of time in that kid's life, things were right. It really highlighted to me that these kids are not the problem.... it's the issues for the parents..."

Whānau develop better decision-making skills

"...when I tried to make it work, it seemed to work..."

Social workers and the family support worker work with whānau throughout their time on Life to the Max, guiding and supporting them to learn skills that they hope will help them make better decisions. We heard about a number of new skills learned by whānau that were directly related to their decision making – particularly the day to day micro decisions that are made in the face of children's behaviour. Whānau told us that they learned to

breathe, speak differently, be more patient – all of which positively affected the decisions they made in response to their children’s behaviour.

There are positive changes in whānau relationships

Staff, schools and whānau told us about a number of changes that happened to the relationships within whānau as a result of participating in Life to the Max. For example, one whānau told us that the atmosphere at home has changed for the better, people are relating to each other in positive ways, and another whānau told us that they were not fighting as much.

“...we did family things well...”

“We all made it work...”

Whānau are more resilient

Agencies and schools told us that because Life to the Max supports whānau and carers to learn new skills and behaviours, families are able to build their resilience.

“It really comes down to the family having the resilience and tools to make those changes.”

This resilience is built up by working with whānau to address their own behaviours and relationships with their children and others in their lives.

Agencies and schools told us that they see the biggest changes in the children who participate in the service, when the whānau get involved in trying to work towards the goals they set in their plans.

“It empowers people to actually understand that the plan is about their lives getting better...”

Schools told us they felt a key part of this shift is that whānau feel they have choice about making changes in their lives. Life to the Max doesn’t tell them what to do, they are not directed like some other agencies; they are able to be self-determining in their engagement with Life to the Max.

“I think any time a parent gets to choose, whether or not they engage, that’s huge...”

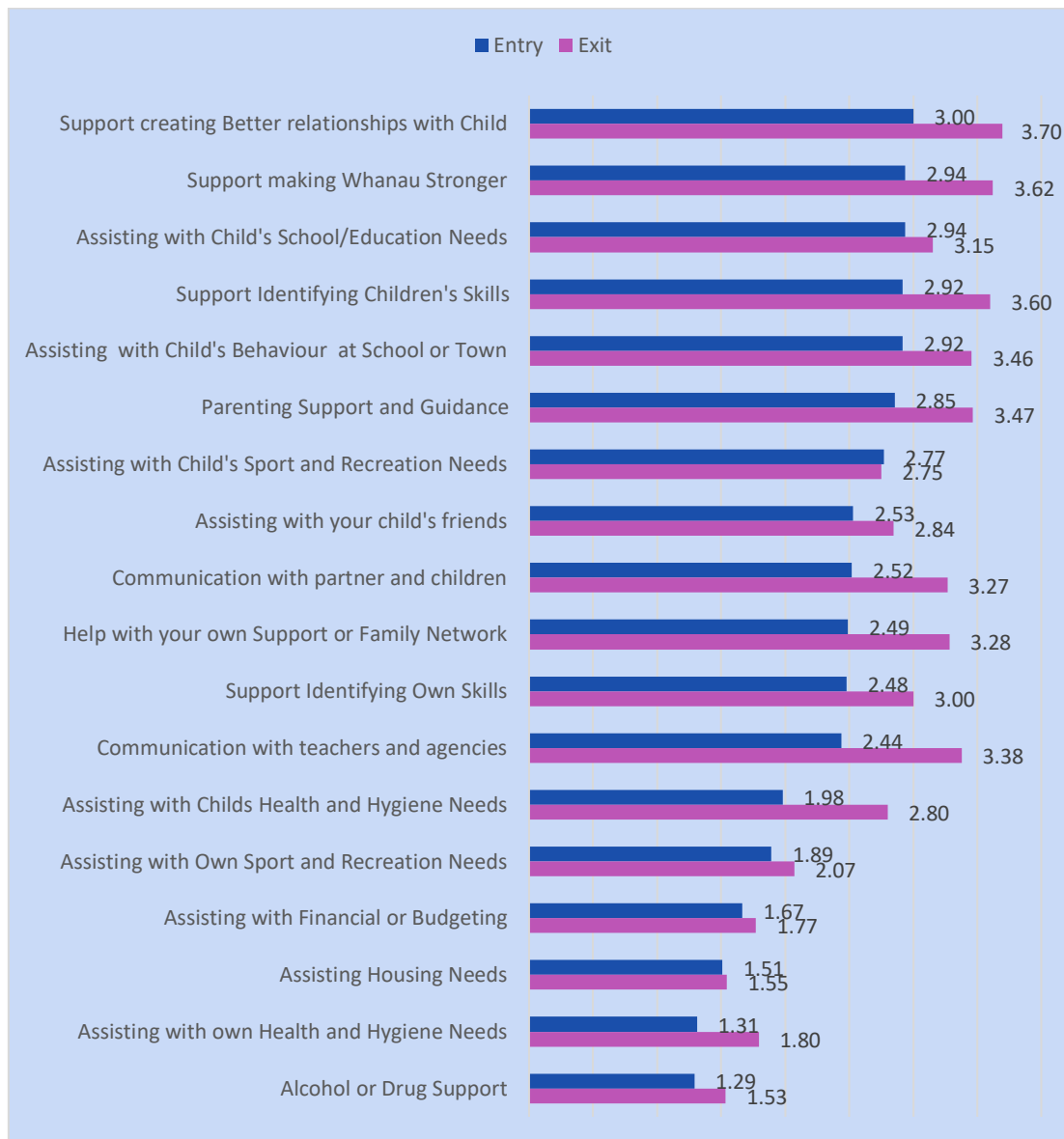
Addressing whānau needs

As already discussed, Life to the Max asks whānau to complete a survey at the beginning and end of their time in the service. This entry survey asks about a range of needs they perceive they might have. For whānau, the survey asks about a range of needs such as support with their relationship with their child, with other whānau, with children’s learning and school, communication with school, assistance with children’s behaviour, parenting support and guidance, housing and budget assistance as well as drug and alcohol support.

The exit survey for whānau asks how much Life to the Max addressed these needs. Like the survey for children, these surveys have been now been redeveloped as part of the evaluation process. The data we report on here uses the survey responses of whānau and caregivers for participants who participated in 2018 and 2019.

Figure 7 below shows that whānau perceived the help provided by Life to the Max was greater, in almost all instances, than the need they perceived they had at the outset.

Figure 7: Life to the Max Whānau Pre and Post Interview Scores (Average scores overall for whānau or caregivers of clients with Life to the Max 2018-2019)



In summary

The evidence suggests that participating whānau experience a range of positive outcomes as a result of their involvement in Life to the Max. As with the children, the outcomes we heard whānau describe also align with the theory of the change. One outcome in the theory of change that we didn't hear whānau talk about in the qualitative feedback, is improvements to their health. This was surprising because it shows up in the entry and exit

interview data, as a need that was met by Life to the Max. It would be worth exploring how to verify this outcome further, as health is a key cornerstone and we heard staff talk many times about supporting whānau with their health needs.

What parts of Life to the Max's 'ways of operating' make a difference for clients and their whānau?



In this section, we describe those aspects of the Life to the Max practice and approach that children and their whānau, caregivers and agencies told us they valued and made a difference to their experience of Life to the Max.

Fun

The children we spoke to told us that **Life to the Max was fun**. Every single child talked about how much fun they had in their time in the service. Some said they didn't want it to end. Lots of activities were memorable, even months and years later, such as riding horses, trampolining, swimming, laser-tag, fishing, or simply having a picnic in the park with pizza.

The children's whānau and caregivers told us they don't normally get the opportunity to have these experiences because they don't have the resources or time.

"...its good, they don't get mad and you get to do fun stuff..."

"...it was pretty cool, amazing..."

One agency and schools told us that for these children, the chance to simply have fun, gives them a break from their normal lives, it gives the children '...the head space to reflect on things differently'.

Feeling cared for, taking time, listening, not judging and building trust

We were told that one of the other most important aspects of Life to the Max for these children was that they **felt they cared about them**. One of the ways they talked about this care was simply by being there for them, for little things, like giving them a lift to school when mum couldn't do it, as well as for more important things like health appointments and sport or recreational commitments.

"They are always there... very caring and understanding..."

They also felt cared for because Life to the Max staff listened and didn't judge them. And this really mattered, because they described feeling judged by lots of adults in their lives.

We heard that Life to the Max staff extend care to the whānau and caregivers of the children in the service also. Whānau and caregivers stressed how important **feeling cared for** was to them. Just having a coffee or being able to talk to someone who doesn't judge you or want you to do anything was highly valued by whānau. It meant so much to the whānau and caregivers we spoke to that Life the Max staff were open and willing to listen and show they cared, by just being there.

"I've been out with them...having a cry – wonderful – a shoulder to lean on... when you get frustrated with the system. And you don't know where to go, and you need a vent..."

"...warm and nurturing and non-judgemental. wonderful..."

We also heard that this care extended to 'helping whānau out' in small and larger ways. Life to the Max staff visit whānau regularly, helping with transport for the children when it's needed to attend sports or other commitments, or for whānau who had meetings they needed to attend.

"They used to go to lots of different things with me, school meetings and that kind of thing, they'd come with me, be at the meetings. Sometimes they'd come and pick you up and give you a ride... I have no car..."

"We were going through anxieties and stresses. We were stressed out, and our place was quite a mess... They helped us tidy up the place. Made us feel good about ourselves. Just knowing that the support was there..."

"...they helped me...they were there to support me as well, not just only the kids... with whatever, and whenever... if I couldn't pick up one of the kids... I could ring them, and they would pick them up for me... they would support me in ways that really did help me..."

When we asked whānau, what are Life to the Max really good at? Many told us that they are good at 'being there for parents too'. **Taking time** to listen and just be there we heard was a key part of **building trust**, and only then do children and their whānau and caregivers feel **willing and motivated to engage**. In turn, they are more open to support that might help them think their way through issues and problems they are dealing with.

We heard over and over again, that the critical factors in the Life to the Max approach is being able to take the time to listen, demonstrating they care, and building trusted relationships so that children and whānau are willing to engage and open up to new ideas and behaviours.

"...engagement is not out of fear...I trust these people with my life, with my kids... The staff there have got that...they have that time to do that..."

"I could just talk to her...I could say whatever I was feeling and yeh...and she was always there for me..."

"...could trust the people there... if you want to say something – you can say it..."

Guidance and encouragement

We heard from whānau and caregivers that they valued the guidance and encouragement Life to the Max social workers and family support worker gave them to think differently about their issues and problems as well as to learn new skills and behaviours.

"I learned stuff myself...Me and Val did a parenting course. I got a certificate for being a parent..."

"...gave me a lot of support, information on how to control behaviour... bit of support and advice on how to handle things differently..."

"...Val... she would take us out... and talk about how the girls were doing..."

Although all the whānau we spoke to had finished their time with Life to the Max, some reflected that they missed not having the support of Life to the Max.

"I miss all that – cup of coffee – helping me get something off my chest – somethings you can't say to anyone else..."

For those whānau that missed their connection with Life to the Max, it was mostly about 'having someone to talk to', a 'someone' they trusted and felt able to talk things through with, that they missed.

Social workers and the family support worker commented that in general they thought the time children and families had in the service was about right. Generally, most felt that one intensive year was necessary to make any difference. However, several agencies and schools commented on what they saw as a need for some flexibility around the time children spend with the service. They felt a year was just the right amount of time for most children, but some children and whānau needed more.

Being there for whānau as well as children

Although the child is the primary client in the Life to the Max service, their practice model recognises that it's not enough to just work with the young person alone. Working with **the family is critical to making a difference** for these children. As mentioned earlier, siblings of clients are included in the service when they can be.

"...with Life to the Max, they try to make inroads with the family. It really comes down to the family having the resilience and tools to make those changes... the biggest changes are when the whānau as a whole get involved."

Many of the whānau we spoke to told us the thing that really made a difference to them was that Life to the Max was there for them as parents or caregivers, as well as being there for their young person.

"...it's a family thing... we're going to do this with all of you..."

"The parents themselves realise that it is their problem, not Johnnies problem... that is where I see the big changes happen. How they [Life to the Max] work with the parents and engage with the parents. If the parents don't engage, then you will struggle..."

Role modelling

The Life to the Max social workers and family support worker talked to us about the importance of modelling behaviour that supports positive changes for children and their whānau. This is done through the daily actions of social workers in interaction with children and whānau through the use of body language, as well as demonstrating positive ways of dealing with a range of different situations.

One example of modelling noted by whānau and partner agency staff we spoke to was how Life to the Max social workers 'do as they say they will'. They described them as honest and reliable and always being there for you. Whānau also commented on the value of the modelling that these social workers did for their children. For example, they observed that their young person's language became less confrontational, they were more polite, more thoughtful and more kind in their interactions. They believed this was because of the practice such as kindness, showing respect, and making positive choices being modelled on the programmes.

The practice of modelling of positive behaviours is also noted by schools and children and is highly valued. Several of the children talked to us about how they learned new skills and patterns of behaviour by watching how the Life to the Max social workers talked and behaved in their interactions with other children, as well as with adults.

"...what's that word? They were good role models..."

Professionalism

The staff of Life to the Max are perceived by agencies, partners and schools as being highly professional, committed as well as being down to earth.

"I rely on the integrity of the social workers."

They are well known faces in the community and agencies trust that when they refer a child, they will be better off with Life to the Max's intervention.

"... it would have been much more of a negative outcome if Life to the Max wasn't involved."

Adults and children also said that one of the strengths of Life to the Max is their ability to relate to children. This was seen as essential to gaining the respect and trust of children – and ultimately of getting the buy-in of children and their whānau to making changes in their lives.

“... they go down to the child’s level... they sort it out the way they think a kid would understand.”

Life to the Max are perceived as being in a unique position to be able to take the time to build relationships of trust with children and whānau. Relational trust is an important precursor to meaningful engagement. Life to the Max staff are regarded as having the skills, experience and professionalism to build trust, engage meaningfully to support children and their whānau deal with the issues they have. The combination of life experience and professionalism is what stands out as making the difference for those we talked to.

“...they are very professional and will do their best to be client focused and are good at following up on what needs to happen.”

Schools were clear that without Life to the Max, there would be a ‘huge hole’. The wholistic approach taken by Life to the Max was described as being ‘really, really important’ and not available anywhere else in Whanganui.

In summary

The Life to the Max wraparound, wholistic model of practice is valued by children, whānau, agencies and schools. Their developmental, collaborative methodology of practice is embodied in their ‘ways of operating’ and it’s clear from the feedback that their practice is operationalizing the concepts in ways that resonate and are visible to others. The Life to the Max ways of operating connect what they do and the results and outcomes that are achieved by children and whānau. The theory of change makes them visible, and the feedback we have received affirms these ways of operating as the nuggets of practice that make a crucial difference.

What organisational factors might maintain and improve the effectiveness of Life to the Max?

Addressing a need in the Whanganui community for wraparound support of vulnerable children and their whānau

Agencies and schools say that Life to the Max addresses a real need in the community, and that there is more need than the service can deal with. Most expressed a desire for Life to the Max to be supported to grow to help meet unmet need in the community.

"There are no other services to my knowledge that provide the whole wrap around service..."

"... why aren't they bigger?"

Some felt that without Life to the Max, the community would be 'massively let down'. They told us that other agencies working with these same vulnerable children and their families don't or cannot do the longer term, wholistic, engagement work that Life to the Max can. This is because they are either too stretched or their work is focused on either the child or the parents, not both.

More capacity to grow?

Life to the Max is a small community-based organisation, with limited funding. All the agencies and schools we spoke to recognised this and were somewhat hesitant to put more pressure on the service. However, without exception, they felt that there is a lot of unmet need in Whanganui, that Life to the Max could be helping to address.

"...sometimes Life to the Max has a waiting list, and we can't get kids in straight away..."

All felt that it would be advantageous for many children in Whanganui if Life to the Max was able to grow, adding more social workers able to work in the intensive way they do currently with children and their whānau.

"...they're a valued agency in our community and it would be really good to see them grow..."

"...such a short fall of committed Social Workers and a wrap-around organisation such as Life to the Max."

Many also suggested that Life to the Max consider extending the age range the service works with. There were two perspectives on this. One stakeholder suggested that there are many children at year 9 who are still too young and immature for adolescent type services. These young people they felt would benefit greatly from being able to access Life to the

Max. Others suggested a similarly intensive service was needed with teenagers, and they would trust Life to the Max to be able to deliver something as effective as they perceive Life to the Max to be.

There was recognition that extension of the service to other age groups had flow on effects for workforce and funding, but those we spoke to felt it would be of benefit to the community for Life to the Max to explore and consider this extension to the work they already do.

"...would be really good if they could extend the age group a little bit..."

"...Improvement would be to extend, add more workforce..."

Embedding evaluative practice within the organisation

The staff of Life to the Max are a close-knit team. They work in a small space, so are literally in close contact with each other daily. They regularly meet together to go over cases, and to ensure they are able to collaboratively and most effectively respond to the needs of clients. The professionalism and integrity of the staff, as discussed earlier, is what makes this organisation's work valuable to others in the community.

One of the recommendations of the previous evaluation undertaken in 2008 was that Life to the Max should undertake regular self-review and evaluation of programmes and interventions.

The previous evaluation (2008) noted (p48),

The programmes offered by LTTM, combined with the practical, innovative and young people friendly approach reflect all McLaren's and Becroft's criteria for effective interventions. The combinations of workers who are selected to match the needs of particular groups of clients, modelling appropriate behaviours and the strong link to whanau evident in both their practices and comments, make for strong interventions.

However, we reiterate that the development of regular self-evaluation of programmes and interventions is critical for LTTM if it is to continue to innovate and develop its services in ways that will play an instrumental role in the development of the young people they support.

We found that this was still not a feature of the organisational culture. In our view, one of the main reasons for this has been a lack of systematic data from which to review the regular and specific programmatic work that is being done. A lot of data is entered into the operational database, and there are also extensive paper files kept about each client. However, the ability to review the quality and value of Life to the Max's practice and programming is hampered by not being able to extract, analyse and report on this data easily. And although there is some written feedback from children at the end of some of the more specific group programmes, there is no record of a systematic review process taking place after each of these group programmes, nor of a more wholistic review of the needs these group programmes are meeting as a whole.

Just as in the previous evaluation, our interviews identified some very good practice and outcomes. However, these are not visible and effectively hidden from sight because systems and processes are not in place to regularly review and reflect on the quality of practice and outcomes of the work being done.

Data management, analysis and use

It was the above finding that prompted the current evaluation process to support Life to the Max to redevelop its operational database, so that improved analysis and reporting could be done. We also supported Life to the Max to redevelop the pre and post surveys for children and whānau, so that in the future, they will have more systematic data from which to review their work.

Having the systems in place is only one aspect of good evaluation and organisational learning. The organisation depends on the commitment of the staff to collecting and inputting data into the systems they have, regularly and accurately, and then using this data. Regular reporting and analysis of patterns, trends and outcomes, as well as reflecting on the outcomes of single cases is an important and essential part of good social work practice.

The new system has the capacity to support a range of different kinds of analysis. The focus of most of the recent redevelopment was on ensuring referral profiles, risk assessments and scores, client and whānau feedback and client goals and plans can now be recorded and reported on. It is now possible to systematically report on and review social worker, client and limited whānau data at the beginning of the client's time in the service, and at the end of their time.

The major data gap that still exists for the organisation is in relation to the everyday work that social workers do with clients and whānau, week-to-week, and the specific group work undertaken by Life to the Max such as the Cared Straight, Boys to Men, Shining Stars programmes etc.

However, the database has extensive records of 'contacts' that Life to the Max has with each client, including the time spent on these contacts. It is possible to develop a nuanced understanding of the emphasis different activities have for different clients. However, these are not used currently to review and reflect on the day-to-day practice and outcomes of clients and whānau. Consideration should be given to using this data as part of supervision as well as part of team meetings and review processes.

Growing the cultural knowledge and practices of the organisation

Gaining increasing strength in social work practice in New Zealand is a commitment to Treaty-based models of practice that acknowledge and embrace Māori cultural knowledge and practices in particular, and Pacific knowledge and practices to a lesser degree in programme development and implementation¹³. This emerging practice has a strengths and assets based underpinning that aims to reduce the dominance and use of Western deficit-oriented models of thinking and practice.

The literature scan we conducted at the beginning of the evaluation process also highlighted that one of the areas of current thought gaining increasing strength across a

¹³ Beals, Foese, Miller, Perkins, & Sargent, 2018; Hay, Dale, & Cooper, 2016, Oranga Tamariki <https://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Documents/Maori-Cultural-Framework-A3.pdf>

range of domains is the move to acknowledge and embrace relevant cultural knowledge and influence in programme development and implementation.

Life to the Max appear to recognise the importance and value of cultural knowledge and practices and have a commitment to strengths-based practice. It is evident in some of their group programme documentation and we observed that there were elements of tikanga Māori incorporated into some of their group work. The reported positive interactions and engagement with schools and whānau by social workers implies there is an implicit 'knowing' about appropriate engagement with Māori whānau.

However, we did not see a significant incorporation of Treaty-based, or tikanga Māori cultural practice in the organisation's everyday ways of doing things. It's a very taken for granted aspect of the work, that is mostly embodied in two of the social workers in particular. Given that such a large percentage of their clients and whanau identify as Māori, this is an area of possible development for the organisation. This could be as simple as the daily incorporation of aspects of Māori tikanga into the organisation's ways of operating, e.g., morning karakia, blessing of food, learning of waiata etc. It could also include professional development for all staff in Māori language learning, and/or more systems-oriented work, such as a cultural review of the organisation's policies and procedures.

A decolonising approach might also be considered¹⁴. This kind of approach requires a long-term line of sight but may reap longer term rewards. This might include additional actions such as active engagement in learning about and understanding the history of the place, including the historical relationships between police, justice institutions, social work practice and Māori. The development of long-term mutual agreed relationships with local iwi, kaumatua and kuia might also be beneficial for the organisation and a key part of its strategic responsiveness.

¹⁴ Huygens, Ingrid (2011) Developing a Decolonisation Practice for Settler Colonisers: A Case Study from Aotearoa New Zealand, *Settler Colonial Studies*, (2)1, 53-81.

Conclusion: What have we learned about the effectiveness of Life to the Max's approach and practice for children and their whānau?

The validity of Life to the Max's underpinning concepts of practice and theory of change were affirmed in the evidence we have seen and analysed. The weaving together of these concepts is translating into practice that makes sense and is valued by the children, their whānau and agencies in the community. This practice is also resulting in many positive outcomes for children and whānau.

We heard that Life to the Max takes **time to listen** and **build relationships in non-judgemental** ways with children and their whānau. They do things that show children and whānau that they really **care**.

They demonstrate **respect** for everyone they work with through their actions and this leads to children and whānau developing **trust** in Life to the Max. And with trust, children and whānau become willing and **motivated to engage** and work with Life to the Max. In a trusted relationship, children and whānau hear the **encouragement** given and see the **guidance** being **modelled** in the **interactions** Life to the Max has with them and in the boundaries they set.

It is in **trusted professional relationships** that Life to the Max **supports** children and their whānau to **strengthen and develop** the **attitudes, new skills and behaviours** that support them to make positive changes in their lives.

The organisation has long operated on a skinny resource base. This situation means the organisation has some fragility. They are dependent on a few key individuals for the good work they do, and they have a low level of capacity to take on extra work. They also don't have sufficient capacity currently to support further growth and development of the organisation without additional resources. For example, although they have an updated database, there is a need for considerable support to ensure the use of this system becomes embedded in the organisation.

Life to the Max has a long history of supporting children and whānau to reduce children's risk of offending and improve their wellbeing overall. Their collaborative, wrap-around model of practice leads to positive outcomes for children and whānau. Whānau, children and agencies value the professional, passionate, caring work they do; they are meeting an important need in the community that isn't being addressed by anyone else.

The service's success depends on the quality and professionalism of their staff, it is these people who, on a daily basis, apply their model of practice and theory of change. These staff are respected and trusted by children, whānau and agencies. For this service to continue having the positive impact it does, resources need to be found to support their ongoing practice development and learning, as individuals, as a team, and as an organisation.

Appendix One: Literature Scan – influences and themes

Background

Life to the Max Whanganui is a child-focused youth development service in Whanganui focused around supporting children and young people who are on the margins, or have the potential, to become engaged within the formal youth justice system. Life to the Max's principle aim is to prevent children who have been identified as at risk of offending (or who have participated in low-level offending) progressing to more serious anti-social and illegal behaviours (Life to the Max, 2017). The service is supported by local Police who provide premises and other resources and maintain a regular and close association through a Police Youth Aid Liaison Officer. As well as their association with the Police, Life to the Max collaborate with a range of local and national agencies and services, including schools, Oranga Tamariki, regional businesses (e.g., through donation of places in group-based activities that form part of Life to the Max's specific interventions), and other relevant community groups.

The principal clients of Life to the Max are children aged between 5 to 13 years old who are at risk of offending. Participation in the service is voluntary and children are accepted into the service following a formal referral and assessment process. Referrals can be received from a range of sources, including families/whanau, Police, schools, and other agencies; prospective clients may also self-refer. All referrals are initially assessed by the service manager in conjunction with a qualified social worker. Children identified as needing more specialised care (e.g., those with mental health issues.) are referred on to other agencies who can provide relevant expert support.

The initial assessment process is face to face and includes identification of risks, strengths and other needs and gathering of other professional's information. Life to the Max uses the YORST tool (youth offending risk screening tool) in this assessment. This initial assessment also identifies whether children meet the criteria for entry to the service. An individualised plan is developed after the initial assessment. Children are then allocated to a social worker who completes an entry interview with caregivers and children. The outcome of this interview process helps to identify, from the whanau perspective, a starting point for their journey with Life to the Max. Participation in Life to the Max is voluntary and all children and whanau give their consent to participate. It is expected that children and whanau will be with Life to the Max for a 12-month period, but this varies depending on the child and whanau. During the time children and whanau are with Life to the Max, they will receive individual support (e.g., one-to-one social work, educational and, in-family support) and complete up to four specific group-based intervention components with other children of the same gender (i.e., 4 group components for girls, 4 group components for boys). Individual and group interventions are developed to address particular facets of assessed need, and children and their families only take part in programmes that are appropriate to their specific needs. Group components run through school terms. Components may overlap for individual clients depending on their requirements and progress). These programmes are designed so children engage with each other and their programme leader in group-based activities, combined with group and individual reflection and assessment.

Family and/or supporters may also participate in specific activities. In addition to the initial risk assessment, children and families/supporters provide feedback and evaluation during and at completion of their overall time in the service.

The majority of referrals are accepted into the Life to the Max service, on a first-come-first served basis. The average number of families participating in the service at any one time is 26. Active numbers are limited by the funding and capacity of the Life to the Max team to work effectively with children and whanau. Referrals commonly outnumber available places and so there is routinely a waiting period before new clients can begin taking part in the service.

Life to the Max's service is founded on and driven by formal social work-practices. Originally based around an individually centred, problem solving methodology, Life to the Max has since transitioned to a developmental, strengths-based collaborative approach (Milne & Sanders, 2008). A small team of qualified social workers and a family support worker develop, adapt, and lead specific programme components (with the assistance of other qualified personnel in specific relevant contexts). The Life to the Max team, including social workers, the service manager, family support worker, support personnel, and police liaison officer regularly meet and review progress of the overarching service, specific components, individual clients, and community partnerships. Relevant Life to the Max team members also commonly take part in school meetings, interagency meetings and conferences.

Précis of Key Themes

The majority of people who commit a crime as children or teens will go on to lead law abiding lifestyles as they mature into adulthood. However, a moderate but significant percentage - typically around 20% - of those young people will continue to perpetrate further, and often more serious, offences as they age (Moffit, 1993; Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre, 2018). Such persistent offending can lead to very real and damaging repercussions for victims, perpetrators, local communities, and society as a whole. Negative outcomes from offending include material loss and physical/psychological trauma suffered by victims; costs associated with processing offenders through judicial, custodial, and probation systems; and distress and anxiety of affected families and communities (Johnston, 2016). Consequently, while only a relatively small percentage of young people may regularly offend, the effects of their crimes are disproportionate to their actual numbers and can be largely felt.

Rehabilitation

One mechanism to deter criminal behaviour is the threat that offenders will be captured and incarcerated. As a result, historically, incarceration as punishment has been a theme frequently revisited in both youth and adult custodial practices (Newbold, 2008). Moreover, while there is a growing emphasis on rehabilitation of convicted offenders, allocation of financial resources, lack of qualified staff and relevant programmes and services, and political and community will still skew towards punishment rather than rehabilitation (Johnston, 2016; Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor, 2018a). Accordingly, once offenders enter the formal judicial system opportunities for their rehabilitation may be constrained. That constraint is particularly significant for young people because the pathway from juvenile to adult criminal behaviour is well established. Put another way, the evidence indicates that imprisonment in and of itself frequently leads to negative long-term

outcomes for young people in particular (and so too for those who will be affected by their future crimes).

Some proportion of the 20% of young people who serially offend will eventually achieve positive outcomes. Either their ongoing exposure to the judicial system, or their broader life experiences, or a combination of both, will curtail their offending. However, it is also clear that a sole strategy of waiting until young people offend and relying on capture and incarceration is neither the most effective nor efficient method to achieve favourable outcomes for individuals or communities (Ministry of Justice, 2010; Ludbrook, 2012). Therefore, while the traditional judicial-custodial process is shifting to incorporate programmes that encourage rehabilitation (Department of Corrections, 2009; Polaschek, 2011), complimentary strategies are also developing. One promising approach is to divert young people who may be at risk of offending from doing so before they commit crimes (Johnstone, 2016). Such early intervention has the potential to facilitate positive change in at risk youth, and disrupt the pathway between low-level juvenile behaviours, serial youth crime, and an ongoing adult criminal lifestyle. Life to the Max Whanganui adopts this early intervention model.

Early Intervention

Life to the Max's current approach is based on four cornerstones - Family/Whanau, Health, Education, and Community/Recreation. These cornerstones follow key ideas surfaced in an analysis of the causes and solutions to youth crime published by The Ministry of Youth Affairs (McLaren, 2000), and that have been broadly supported in subsequent work (Ludbrook, 2012; Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor, 2018b; Warren & Fraser, 2009). While primarily about offenders and formal justice processes, McLaren identified areas of risk that most likely have causal effects on offending, including: individual factors (e.g., physical health, psychological characteristics), school (e.g., academic performance, truancy), family (e.g., intra-family conflict, parental supervision), peers (e.g., gang connections, delinquency), work (e.g., unemployment, skills), neighbourhood (e.g., poverty, social cohesion), and recreation (e.g., passive/active, (un)supervised).

McLaren also offered a range of specific suggestions about the type and focus of potentially effective early interventions to discourage or reduce offending, including: using cognitive and behavioural techniques (e.g., teaching problem solving), modelling desirable behaviour (e.g., having young people interact with staff engaging in positive behaviours), accountability (e.g., encouraging responsibility for behaviour), involving families, and working across multiple contexts relevant to young people (e.g., families, schools). Life to the Max's four cornerstones reflect a synthesis of the risk areas and solutions noted by McLaren and others, adapted to suit Life to the Max's available resources, capacity, and the particular life contexts of their target clients (Life to the Max, 2017). So, 'Family/Whanau' and 'Education' map well to discrete risks (family, school), while 'Health' and 'Community/Recreation' combine elements of multiple risk areas (e.g., individual factors, peers, neighbourhood, recreation). It is worth noting that much of the current literature on youth criminology deals with young people who are already offenders and are within the criminal justice system. 'Health issues' for that cohort commonly involve problems of substance abuse, mental illness, and other explicitly diagnosed conditions (e.g., Ludbrook, 2012; Ministry of Justice, 2009). In contrast, Life to the Max work with young people who are on the margins of offending and refer on to specialist agencies those who are in need of expert care. While Life to the Max will encounter and support clients with moderate

specific health issues, their health care remit focuses more on ensuring healthy day-to-day practices are encouraged and followed by clients and their families (e.g., healthy eating, hygiene, healthy routines) and assisting clients in their interactions with specialised care agencies.

A common theme tying together such risks and solutions across much of contemporary youth service work is the utility of targeting multiple 'systems'; that is, implementing interventions across a range of social systems and contexts that are directly relevant to the young people involved (e.g., multi-systemic therapy - Dopp, Borduin, White, & Kuppens, 2017; Fox & Ashmore, 2015). Put simply, most benefits can be achieved by working with young people across multiple settings using multiple techniques. Life to the Max's stated philosophy of practice and the design and implementation of their programmes draws on that approach, emphasising "partnerships with parents/caregivers and local agencies" and the inclusion of families and the community in solutions provision (Life to the Max, 2017). Along those lines, Life to the Max specifically follows a wraparound, holistic model of practice.

Wraparound

Originally developed as a strategy to effectively respond to young people experiencing mental illness, wraparound is a "comprehensive, wholistic, and youth and family-driven" process for working with young people in need of care or support (National Wraparound Initiative, 2018). The central motivation behind the growth of wraparound was to shift youth care from being driven by what support providers wanted from young people, to a process centred around what young people and families themselves needed to develop and thrive. Wraparound implementations commonly focus on building strategies and skills to meet client needs, working closely with interpersonal and community networks, and comprehensive processes to monitor, assess, and adapt interventions against collaboratively agreed goals. Significant components of that process are keeping young people with their families and in their local communities, developing individualised support programmes, and collaborating and coordinating with other agencies (National Wraparound Implementation Centre, 2018; National Wraparound Initiative, 2018; Smith, et al., 2018; Walker, 2008;).

Since its inception, the wraparound model has been widely implemented and adapted across various contexts of youth work internationally (e.g., Hill, 2011; Smith et al., 2018; Street, Hill, & Welham, 2009). Schurer Coldiron and colleagues (2017) comprehensively examined wraparound's continuing prominence in youth work sectors, perhaps driven in part by its capacity to be adapted by practitioners to local contexts. Notably, they also recommended the need for further empirical work to build an evidence base to assess and evolve the model. Shailer and colleagues' (2017) recently undertook just such work in their investigation of wraparound implementation in a New Zealand context, finding overall support for its use.

In keeping with Life to the Max's shift towards a developmental collaborative methodology of practice, the wraparound model interconnects closely with their cornerstones of Family/Whanau, Health, Education, and Community/Recreation - the core around which their individual and group-based programme components are delivered. Life to the Max assert their service explicitly centres young people as principal clients, directly includes siblings and caregivers in relevant intervention components, maintains clients in their home environments, and purposefully incorporates familiar contexts such as schools and local

communities. Moreover, Life to the Max service implementation guidelines stress active collaborations with other government and community agencies (e.g., assisting young clients and their families in their interactions with those organisations, visiting and working with schools and teachers where possible; Life To The Max, 2017; Milne & Sanders, 2008; Walker, 2008).

Wraparound implementations typically involve clients and support professionals working together over extended periods of time (e.g., young clients in the Life to the Max programme may see their primary social worker several times a week for the duration of their time with Life to the Max, individually or in group settings). Additionally, by design, interactions may address issues that are difficult and potentially upsetting for clients. Because it emphasises client focus, successful implementation of a wraparound model requires a positive and trusting relationship between young clients and their support providers as individuals and as organisations (i.e., clients - and their families - must not only trust their individual support worker personally, but also trust the methods and motivations of the provider organisation as whole). Indeed, some research points to the difficulty of developing and assessing such relationships in intensive wraparound implementations (Schurer Coldiron, Bruns, & Quick, 2017; Walker, Seible, & Jackson, 2017). Life to the Max acknowledge these requirements, giving prominence to attracting and retaining high-quality staff, encouraging ongoing training and adherence to evidenced-based practices, and being open and accountable with clients, all as mechanisms to “maintain credibility and a high reputation” with clients and families/whanau (Life to the Max, 2017).

Strength-based

Contemporary rehabilitation and youth work strategies commonly emphasise strength-based approaches (Case & Morris, 2018; Fortune, 2018; Ludbrook, 2012), and such approaches are similarly integral to many wraparound implementations (Johnston, 2016; National Wraparound Implementation Centre, 2018; Nisbet, Graham, & Newell, 2012; Shailer, Gammon, & de Terte, 2017). As with wraparound, the strength-based approach was conceptualised as a way to shift the prevailing discourse around juvenile mental health and crime towards more effective practice models and systems of care (Rapp & Sullivan, 2014). While there can be wide and sometimes diverging interpretation and application of strength-based approaches, the approach is founded on a set of principles that dovetail with the wraparound model: underlining people’s capacity to learn, grow and change; focusing on strengths not deficits; viewing community as a resource; a client-centred approach; the centrality of the client-professional relationship; locating and undertaking work in communities/contexts that are natural for clients (Rapp & Sullivan, 2014; Vandeveld, et al., 2017).

In essence, a strength-based approach seeks to support and rehabilitate clients by identifying and developing their skills and competencies, and leveraging and improving their existing familial, social, and community networks and relationships (one way of thinking about this is that strength-based approaches propose that rather than focusing on eliminating specific negative behaviours, cultivating an individual’s positive skills, competencies, and social support will lead to a reduction in negative behaviours overall). Thus, the strength-based approach explicitly aims to develop skills and coping strategies in clients - that is, demonstrating to and teaching clients practical methods and responses for dealing with situations, thoughts, and emotions they will encounter in their everyday lives (Laine Scales, et al., 2013; Fortune, 2018). Current discourse around ‘scared straight’

programmes provides an illustration. Scared straight and similar initiatives involve young people visiting prisons, taking part in para-military boot camps, or engaging in other activities designed to 'shock' or 'scare' and so deter them from future criminal behaviour. However, the literature suggests that such programmes are generally not effective (Ludbrook, 2012; McLaren, 2000; Petrosino et al., 2014; Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor, 2018b), and the prevalence of models that emphasise more tailored interventions based around positive experiences and engagement is growing (importantly, wraparound strength-based approaches do not shy from 'toughness', but rather incorporate toughness by emphasising clients confront and be accountable for their lives).

Life to the Max adopted a strength-based approach as a natural fit with their move to a collaborative, wraparound practice methodology. As with their advocacy of rehabilitation, early intervention, and wraparound principles and solutions, Life to the Max explicitly commit to a strength-based credo and plan of action. They specifically assert their commitment to focus on developing positive aspects of their clients' lives, and the right of all their young clients to lead such lives. Furthermore, their practice is premised on the idea that their clients themselves have valuable knowledge, experience, and skills to share, and that an essential part of their role as support workers is to reveal and nurture those qualities to enable their clients to maximise their potential (Life to the Max, 2017).

Life to the Max's intervention components are designed to operationalise their commitment to a strength-based approach. One advantage of a wraparound model is its adaptability; that is, it allows considerable scope for service providers to assess, tailor, and develop strategies and interventions best suited to their client base and context. That being so, Life to the Max's tailored care plans are built around working individually and collaboratively with their young clients, their families, and their significant social networks, and incorporate practical interactions with relevant external personnel and agencies to demonstrate and build skills, capacity, connections, and resilience. Provision of support in real-life settings combined with having clients engage and interact with others, and so themselves model positive behaviours, are key elements. Accordingly, specific service components include group activities undertaken with fellow clients to develop confidence and self-esteem, judgment and tolerance, deal with individuality and peer pressure, express gratitude and assertiveness, and work in teams. Vocational and recreational skills are addressed through interactive group visits to businesses and recreational organisations sites (e.g., defence force groups, training institutes, farms and other workplaces). Life to the Max's social workers and community support workers also work with individual clients and their families to assess their broad range of collective and individual needs, and then develop strategies or activities to meet those needs (e.g., helping to create a schedule of household chores, facilitating interactions with other agencies, advising and assisting intra-family communication) (Life to the Max, 2017; Milne & Sanders, 2008).

The 'cared straight' group component is an example of how Life to the Max have used the flexibility of the wraparound strength-based approach to develop an intervention contextualised for their client context. Playing on the widely known 'scared straight' methodology, cared straight has been designed to educate participants about making right choices, and about the consequences of offending. Rather than confrontation and shock, cared straight revolves around young clients meeting and interacting with representatives from law enforcement and justice systems in their places of work (e.g., Police Stations, Prisons), but in a thoughtful, measured, and collaborative context (Life to the Max, 2017; Milne & Sanders, 2008).

Active Participation

Encouraging active participation of both clients and providers is a fundamental aspect of wraparound, strength-based approaches. Active participation has at least two potential meanings, however. Firstly, it can refer to programmes that encourage ‘learn by doing’ methods where clients are not only told about behaviours and processes they can use to make positive changes in their everyday lives but are also provided opportunities to carry out those behaviours and try out those processes. Life to the Max’s service and programme design leverages their knowledge about local contexts and resources to provide such programme components - for example, offered in collaboration with local business, their annual Whanganui Awa event is a mixed-gender, multi-day excursion on the Whanganui river where Life to the Max staff and experienced guides teach and encourage team-work and participation in practical river skills, and where young clients are exposed to and gain significant cultural knowledge. Similarly, Life to the Max run two group-based interventions - one for girls and one for boys - developed from a serendipitous offer of services from a local horse-riding business. Originally taken up as a way of encouraging exercise and outdoor activity, Life to the Max has adapted and extended their group horse riding exercises to incorporate elements of the developing field of equine thinking (Adams et al., 2015; Ho et al., 2017) and so incorporate confidence, self-esteem, judgment, and team work into those sessions (Life to the Max, 2017; Milne & Sanders, 2008).

That said, active participation can also mean not just telling clients about positive strategies and actions but giving them opportunities to themselves participate and co-develop (or at the least, provide meaningful feedback about) such activities (National Wraparound Initiative, 2018; Shailer, et al., 2017; Vandavelde, et al., 2017). And along similar lines, wraparound assumes that the social workers and community support workers implementing interventions are also invested and have some meaningful say in their nature and execution (National Wraparound Implementation Centre, 2018; National Wraparound Initiative, 2018). Put another way, wraparound, strength-based programmes frequently seek to empower both clients and providers in a collaborative, partnership type of model.

Such models are in wide use across a variety of contexts. Interestingly, however, relatively little formal and systematic evaluation has been undertaken (Schurer Coldiron, et al., 2017). That is not to say these models are ineffective; practitioners and organisations who implement them are general supportive of their use (e.g., Fortune, 2018; National Wraparound Initiative, 2018; Vandavelde, et al., 2017). One reason for the paucity of formal evaluation may be because models are implemented across a wide range of contexts and operationalised in such a variety of ways. Life to the Max do also endorse this collaborative process, emphasising continuing internal evaluation, accountability to their community, active collaboration with families/whanau, and staff empowerment. Moreover, regular evaluations and feedback from clients and families form integral parts of their programme (Life to the Max, 2017; Milne & Sanders, 2008).

Opportunities

The general practice model and specific intervention components adopted and implemented by Life to the Max have robust support in the contemporary literature. Similarly, Life to the Max offers uncomplicated and practical descriptions and guidelines

about their operationalisation of process and practice. Nevertheless, the literature also points to potential challenges and opportunities that may be relevant to Life to the Max's work.

Some of these challenges may be beyond the scope of organisations such as Life to the Max to reasonably address. For example, while the goal of wraparound strength-based programmes may be to equip young people to live productive and fulfilling lives, wider structural barriers and constraints can militate against clients' ability to maximise their potential. Thus, the availability of meaningful employment, housing, social services, and other such meso- and macro-level conditions and structures can make it particularly difficult for people who are perceived to be at the margins to become meaningfully engaged in 'civil' society (Farrall, Bottoms, & Shapland, 2010). On the other hand, the aim of programmes such as Life to the Max is to equip young people who have traditionally been disempowered with the capacity, knowledge, and skills to challenge prevailing social and political structures.

More pragmatically, alongside moves towards the wraparound, strength-based methods championed and in use by Life to the Max are evolutions of processes and practice that have the potential to shift the way those methods are undertaken. Two trends in particular might be particularly relevant for Life to the Max.

Firstly, in accordance with some of Life to the Max's current practice, moves to explore and encourage meaningful co-development of programmes in youth work more generally are gaining prominence. Researchers and practitioners who support such moves conceptualise co-development not just as seeking and potentially incorporating feedback and evaluation from clients and partners. Rather, co-development involves clients and partners becoming involved in the design, assessment, and evaluation of programmes themselves (Marriott, 2017; NSW Government, 2018; Ramey & Lawford, 2018). For example, in the case of wraparound programmes aimed at preventing youth offending, partners (e.g., police, researcher), representatives from relevant client cohorts (e.g., past clients, community groups), and service provider staff could engage in collaborative workshops to review current practices, design assessment mechanisms, and/or develop ideas for new interventions.

A second current of thought gaining increasing strength across a range of domains is the move to acknowledge and embrace relevant cultural knowledge and influence in programme development and implementation (Beals, Foase, Miller, Perkins, & Sargent, 2018; Hay, Dale, & Cooper, 2016). Again, Life to the Max do recognise the value of cultural practices in their programme documentation and incorporate elements of those practices into their programme implementation. Co-development methodologies may offer a pathway to learn from and/or integrate relevant cultural practices further into their operations.

The need and ability for small organisations like Life to the Max to pursue ideas and methods such as co-design and close integration of cultural practice will be driven by the specific contexts in which they conduct their work, and the resources and capacities that are available to them and their clients and partners. It may well be that these, and other, evolving methodologies are not particularly relevant or appropriate to Life to the Max's context or will not demonstrably increase the effectiveness of their work. Life to the Max themselves have the expertise and experience to assess the utility of the ideas noted here.

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