

# ACTIVITY DESIGN FOR VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE





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# FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

Creating activities that feel like they are ‘for them’

Energise Me created this guide with insight from The Behavioural Architects. It follows on from [Understanding Vulnerable 14 - 19 year-olds](#). If you haven't already read our previous guide, you may want to start there to get the full story.

In short, we wanted to support vulnerable teenagers to get active and live happier and healthier lives. We commissioned The Behavioural Architects to help us understand their views, barriers and motivations.

**“... we wanted to support vulnerable teenagers to get active and live happier and healthier lives.”**

Our first guide shares some of the research findings and guiding principles.

This guide takes it a step further to turn insight into action. Discover tips for tackling barriers and creating activities that appeal to vulnerable teenagers.

The young people we spoke to in Hampshire didn't feel like local activities were ‘for them’. If you share our passion for creating opportunities that are then please get in touch; together we can support vulnerable teenagers to get active.

E: [penny.woods@energiseme.org](mailto:penny.woods@energiseme.org)

# SETTING THE SCENE

Life and sport through our audience's eyes



## CASE STUDY

Male, aged 15



### About me:

I'm really lazy and never really go out. The thing I do most is play Xbox! I really like the shooting games and sometimes I can play it for hours and hours! It's like an addiction. I literally can stay up until 5 in the morning playing. Not good right?

GCSEs are coming up soon which is stressful and I'll probably fail them all. I'm not clever at all. Mum and teachers can't stop going on at me about them, but that just makes me more and more worried about not getting a good grade. I wish I could play Xbox instead.

I know I should do more than just play Xbox, but I know what I'm doing on it, and that I'm good at it, and I won't let anyone else down if I fail at a mission or level.

### Me and sport:

I can't play any sport and never did it at school or been a part of a club. I'm just not interested in it and none of my friends do any sport either.

There's nothing to do in Gosport. It's so boring. I went to Gosport Leisure Centre during the research to go swimming, as I could go whenever. It was relaxing but probably wouldn't go again – lots of kids and people obsessed with getting fit. It's just not my thing.



## CASE STUDY

Female, aged 19



### About me:

I dropped out of college – didn't see the point of it. Now I am an apprentice at a nursery so on my feet all day. I like to crash on the sofa when I get home and not move until bedtime.

I don't really like being around other people I don't know and hate places like nightclubs. I prefer to go to the pub with my mates instead, it's just calmer and away from the noise at home.

### Me and sport:

I've never been into playing sport, it's so embarrassing, everyone watching you. I watch football on TV and standing on the side-lines watching my boyfriend play on Sundays – the best part of the day is going to the pub afterwards!

I reluctantly went to hula fitness during the research. I was really nervous walking into the hall, like everyone was looking at me and they could see everything I was doing. Seeing the hula hoops made me realise I had no clue what I was doing there and just wanted to disappear.

## CASE STUDY

Female, aged 15



### About me:

The best thing about being my age is having more freedom in where I go and when I have to be home. In my spare time I like to watch YouTube videos and talk to my friends, sometimes we'll go to the shops and check out clothes in H&M.

He also said I'd have to pay up front for a month. I have to stay late after school sometimes for extra lessons on a Wednesday so couldn't always make kickboxing, so I guess I wouldn't be able to do it all.

### Me and sport:

I don't really like sports, unless I'm mucking around with my friends.

I went to a kickboxing taster session with my friend Kate. It was a good stress release but when the instructor said it was going to cost £50 to buy the kit I sort of switched off.

If I did it at the weekend, I wouldn't be able to do anything else. I could probably do it two Saturdays a month say, when I don't have to look after my mum or work at dad's shop. But I'd need to be able to choose which dates.



## IN THEIR OWN WORDS



"I used to play football at primary school but someone took my place, the coach said they were better than me as goalie, so I stopped."  
Female, aged 15, Gosport

"I dislike most sporting activities because I'm bad at them. If I run for a long distance, I get out of breath."  
Male, aged 16, Fareham

"The first thing that springs to mind when I think of sports or exercise is school P.E. :-( I never enjoyed school sports as people took it way too seriously to the point where arguments would break out if you made a mistake, which I was always worried about doing."  
Male, aged 18, Swaythling

"I searched the internet for sports activities in Gosport... I don't like the fact that it's mostly for kids."  
Female, aged 18, Gosport

"When I think of sport I think of school PE in a dull, grey building block and my teacher shouting at me and telling me to run to the other side and back again. It's not a fun memory at all!"  
Male, aged 19, Fareham

"I watch a lot of football on TV with my boyfriend, especially the champions league, those players are so skillful... Compared to them you just look absolutely rubbish."  
Female, aged 18, Havant

"With college all week and not knowing my hours at work from week to week means I never know when I'll be free."  
Female, aged 18, Gosport

"Thinking about this stuff just takes your energy... You only have so much and I don't want to give my energy up to think about this sort of stuff."  
Male, aged 18, Swaythling

"I get you have to pay upfront for some things but if it could be like £20 to come any 2 Wednesdays in a month rather than every week, then I could probably think about doing that."  
Female, aged 18, Gosport

"I know doing activity makes you healthier but at the moment I don't think I'm that bad, and it's something I'll start thinking about in the future."  
Male, aged 17, Swaythling

"I don't see the point in doing an activity unless it will help me in the future, something I could put on my CV."  
Male, aged 17, Aldershot



# THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

## A quick recap on the 4 guiding principles

Based on the research shared in [Understanding vulnerable 14 - 19 year-olds](#), The Behavioural Architects identified 4 Guiding Principles to help us appeal to our target audience. These form the essential building blocks of an activity, as we explain on the following pages.

### SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING FAMILIAR

“Novel activities — distinct from the typical sport/fitness for people my age — connected in some way to my world.”

A lack of self-belief makes this audience reluctant to step outside their comfort zone.

### INCLUDED NOT SPOTLIGHTED

“Acknowledge and make me feel welcome, but then allow me to blend into the background.”

They favour non-traditional and flexible environments with a relaxed atmosphere.

### ON MY TERMS

“Let me come as I am and do it my way.”

Regular structured sport/fitness sessions can feel difficult and constraining for their lifestyle.

### PLAY WITH A PURPOSE

“Take the focus off sporting ability and competition and make activity feel relevant by tapping into my immediate priorities.”

Health and fitness is a lesser concern. They're more motivated by CV development, mental health and personal hobbies.

# SESSION DESIGN & FORMAT

## Creating sessions that meet the needs of the target audience

The Behavioural Architects used insight from our research group to create tips for designing activities for vulnerable young people.

### SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING FAMILIAR

- Include variety within a broadly consistent format. For example, you could set different challenges each week or do activities with a twist.
- Base activities on or around existing or aspiring interests such as gaming or photography.

### INCLUDED NOT SPOTLIGHTED

- Focus on individual effort rather than competing or working with others.
- Give a choice of different exercises/options so that everyone can take part at a level they're comfortable with.

### ON MY TERMS

- Eliminate the need to bring/wear special kit by allowing people to show up in jeans or take part in socks.
- Allow participants to take part and sit out when they like during the session.
- Offer moments of choice such as asking what they'd like to learn, try out or listen to.
- Aim for weekday evenings or weekend afternoons but avoid early mornings.
- Offer an 'open house' set up rather than stating a specific start time. For example, you could invite people to join in between 1 and 5pm.
- Offer a flexible pricing structure such as session bundles to use when they can within a set time period.

### PLAY WITH A PURPOSE

- Connect activities to participants' existing motivations/priorities such as CV development, self-defence, or building mental strength.
- Try activities that help participants to switch off and 'escape'. Activities such as parkour can provide a sense of freedom.





## DESIGN PRINCIPLES IN ACTION



### We took a trip to the Archery Club at South Downs College to see how the principles work in action.

- ✓ Many of the young people we spoke to had either tried archery before or had seen it in popular TV series or computer games. That gave it a sense of familiarity. At the same time it also felt new and different from mainstream sports.
- ✓ The focus was on beating your own previous shot rather than competing with others. This meant participants could drop back, take a break, use their phones or chat to others taking part if they wanted to.
- ✓ Participants could wear whatever they wanted and were able to leave early if they needed to catch the bus.
- ✓ Archery provides the escapism our target group craves. It gives a physiological release letting go of the bow. It enables participants to zone out and forget about the stresses in their lives.

“[My daughter] hates PE but when she heard ‘archery’ her ears immediately pinged — she aspires to be like the girls in *Shadow Hunters* — very different, and she never does anything mainstream.”

Participant’s mum

“Archery is different from other sports. It’s cathartic, it relieves lots of stress and I feel really relaxed, but also quite tired with achy arms... but in a good way.”

Female, aged 16, Havant



### Two of our research participants tried out their local Martial Arts Centre in Gosport.

- ✓ The centre varies the exercises each week, from practising hooks one week to uppercuts the next.
- ✓ Participants were able to go with a friend and work in a pair without interacting with strangers. The instructor gave options on different moves so everyone could work at their own ability level without fear of being spotlighted.
- ✓ The group were given lots of water breaks and there were cups by the tap for anyone who didn’t have a water bottle. They were able to chat during exercises. They were also invited to make suggestions on how to spend the last 5 minutes.
- ✓ The sessions have a bigger purpose framed around building self-defence and gave immediate stress relief.

“I liked at the end when he asked for our opinion on what we wanted help with. It felt like our voice was important and that the class could actually help you in real life. I was also relieved there were cups there, didn’t even think about bringing my own water!”

Female, aged 15, Gosport



# VENUE, ENVIRONMENT, ATMOSPHERE

## Creating a safe and welcoming environment

### SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING FAMILIAR

- Use familiar venues that the target group already go to or have positive childhood memories of such as ice rinks.
- OR try different environments that inject a sense of excitement and novelty such as a secret venue *if* the group are already familiar with the organiser or the type of activity.

### INCLUDED NOT SPOTLIGHTED

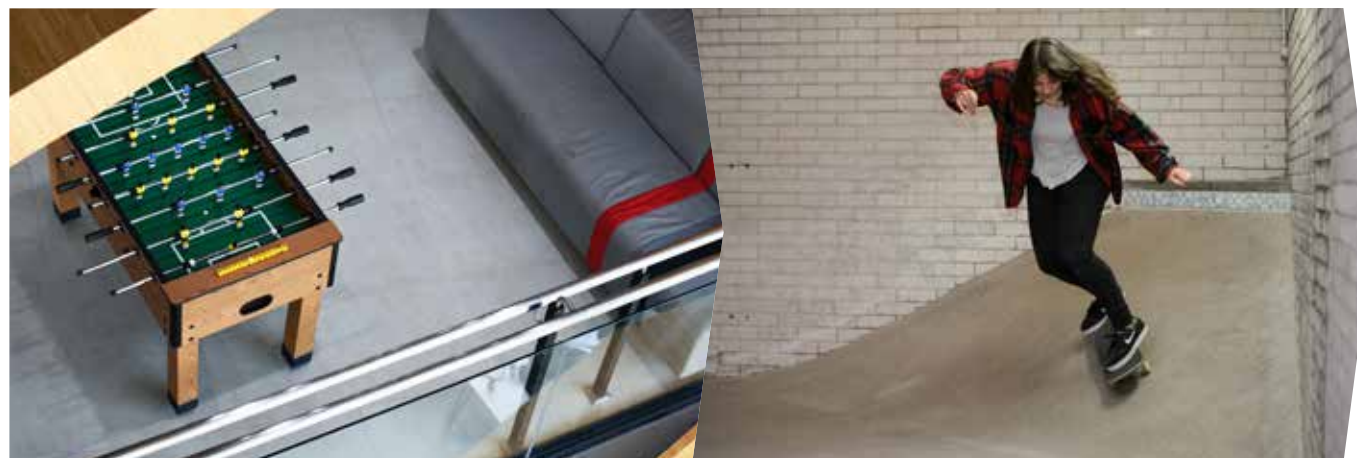
- Create different zones or chill-out areas so people can drop back if needed.
- Aim for broken up layouts so participants feel less exposed than in one big open space.
- Play background music to distract attention and avoid awkward silences.

### ON MY TERMS

- Aim for easy to reach places that they go to already, which are close to home or college or the town centre.
- Make sure the venue is clearly signposted and easy to find.

### PLAY WITH A PURPOSE

- Focus on environments that are suited to non-traditional activities, such as skate parks, warehouses and multi-use environments.
- Seek out local venues that connect to what's important to them such as games workshops or woodland areas that calm the mind.



## ENVIRONMENTAL PRINCIPLES IN ACTION



### We ventured into the woods to explore Woodland Therapy at Bouldner Forest Nature Reserve on the Isle of Wight.

The Woodland Therapy project uses the natural environment to promote mental health and wellbeing using the Forest School approach. It complements mental health provision by building self-esteem, self-confidence and independence in adults struggling with mental health conditions. The sessions are run outdoors with participants taking part in nature-based activities.

Sessions are run in small supervised groups and participants are involved in a variety of nature-based activities. These include nature and craft activities, feeding the birds and building camp fires.

Those who are not feeling up to socialising can relax by the campfire or take a walk in the forest or on the beach.

- ✓ Being in a secluded area signals security and safety for those who want to try new things and escape from busy urban life.
- ✓ The environment is flexible and enables participants to use it how they like.
- ✓ The outside environment enables young people to connect to nature and taps into their need to clear their minds and escape from the stresses of everyday life.

**“My clients have told me that just being in nature has a calming effect on their anxieties and that the way the groups are led is unpressured. They do not have to talk or engage in an activity until they are ready.”**

Leanne, Wheatsheaf Trust



TOP  
SECRET

## We chatted to No Limits about their secret venue meet-ups.

No Limits is a charity, which provides young people with support and advice. They run regular meet-ups that incorporate different physical activities. They introduce the activity at the start of each session, set everything up and let people know that they can take part when they want to.

**“All locations of places are confidential — like being a member. It’s their space and a chance for them to just be themselves.”**  
**Flower, No Limits**

- ✓ No Limits doesn’t disclose the venue until nearer the time, which helps attendees feel safe. It also creates excitement and in-group exclusivity.
- ✓ The sessions are held in cafes and creative spaces that are closed off to the public. It gives them a space to make their own.

# PEOPLE: INSTRUCTOR & PARTICIPANTS

Relating to our target audience and making them feel at home

## SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING FAMILIAR

- Encourage teenagers to attend with someone they have an established relationship with, such as a friend, parent, sibling or support worker.

## ON MY TERMS

- Make an effort to understand the group members’ backgrounds. It’s important to make set-backs feel normal and not penalise them for forgetting kit, missing a session or wanting to drop back.
- Keep in contact in-between sessions with reminders of session times and links to bus timetables.
- Encourage a democratic approach and let groups choose how they spend their last ten minutes.

## INCLUDED NOT SPOTLIGHTED

- Offer personalised feedback and acknowledgement for just showing up. Get in touch with participants when they’re not there so they feel valued and cared for.
- Give different exercises for different skill levels without drawing attention to individuals.
- Try and combine a mix of ages so young people don’t have to worry about being compared to their peers.

## PLAY WITH A PURPOSE

- Involve instructors or volunteers that can relate to vulnerable teenagers and understand their immediate priorities and life difficulties — either from personal experience or from working with young people in similar situations.
- Involve instructors who are a respected authority with knowledge and skills in the activity themselves.
- Take a light-touch approach to ‘teaching’ and recognise that developing sports skills is not enough to motivate this target group. Intersperse moments of relaxation and fun with progressive challenges.
- Help participants internalise benefits such as stress relief by asking how they’re feeling throughout and especially at the end.
- Think about how you can develop activities to bring together like-minded individuals who share a similar goal or purpose such as weight loss, a shared passion for music or gaming, or trying to find work.





## PEOPLE PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

We chatted to our research participants about the people they encountered on their visit to the Martial Arts Centre in Gosport. We observed the founder's and assistant's approaches and the impact they had on the girls' experience.

### The founder

- ✓ The founder, was non-judgmental and relaxed. He didn't bat an eyelid when people arrived in jeans and a hoody.
- ✓ He was experienced in working with struggling teens. He's seen as a respected father figure and parents call him up for advice when their children get into trouble at school or with police.
- ✓ He gives attendees 10 minutes of their own choice at the end of the session. He asks them what self-defence moves they want to learn – for example, if someone grabs you by the neck.
- ✓ He focuses sessions on learning self-defence rather than on martial arts skill or fitness. He uses real world scenarios to motivate.

### The assistant

- ✓ The assistant, aged 15, was relatable. She had been kick-boxing since she was aged 3 but she was also struggling with school and getting into work. Kickboxing was her way to de-stress.
- ✓ She dedicated time to helping the girls get started so they didn't feel lost when the regulars started more complex exercises.
- ✓ She broke down exercises and gave them tips and then she backed off and let them practise on their own.

"[The founder] was fun, making a joke of defending himself, not taking it too seriously and always stayed calm, but was also good at teaching — taking it slowly so we could keep up."

Female, Aged 15, Gosport

"[The assistant] was so cool and strong and helped us lots. I didn't think I'd like being taught by someone my age, but I didn't feel like a child – she wasn't condescending."

Female, Aged 15, Gosport







## We visited the Sportmaker who is responsible for setting up, promoting and running physical activity at South Downs and Havant College.

Once in college, young people are treated as adults and with that comes lots of responsibility and pressure to choose what to do for the rest of their life. Activity gives them freedom and mental downtime.

- ✓ The Sportmaker introduces herself and promotes 'active opportunities' rather than 'sport' at open evenings. 'Sport' is a swear word to some people and she's cautious about putting people off.
- ✓ She uses familiar environments, such as tutor groups' classrooms, and pushes tables together to create instant and informal games of ping pong, otherwise known as Insta-Pong. She then cross-sells other activities she runs such as archery.
- ✓ She takes a very light-touch approach. She reminds them of the safety rules then lets them 'get on with it'. She sits on a bench and is on hand to give them tips as and when they need or ask for them.
- ✓ She allows attendees to leave early, wear what they like and be on their devices.
- ✓ She promotes archery as a way of burning calories with minimal sweat and as a time to switch off and take a break from thinking.

**"It's about handholding – once I'd built rapport with a boy suffering from low self-esteem in archery, I suggested he try the informal hockey session I run, telling all about when it was, where, who would be there etc. and he turned up, because he knew me and didn't have to think that much! He comes most weeks now."**

**Sportmaker, South Downs and Havant College**

## SOCIAL SUPPORT



**When someone is first starting out, handholding and support from trusted individuals such as family and friends or support workers is key to:**

### Opening their eyes to relevant ways to be active

Trusted individuals can play a vital role in identifying or referring teenagers to sessions and reassuring them that it is 'for them'. They can help highlight benefits that relate to the young person's immediate priorities.

### Helping them get started and take part (practically and emotionally)

Having someone to make enquiries, get them there and give encouragement and reassurance, or even do an activity with them can make it feel normal.

**Once participating, instructors/coaches and other participants play an important role in helping people to feel that they belong.**

**"I've always wanted her to have an interest or focus because of everything going on at home. An interest would give her some consistency, so I always suggest things she might like to try."**

**Mum of female, aged 14, Eastleigh**



# PROMOTION AND DELIVERY CHANNELS

## Tapping into broader motivations and gaining trust

### SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING FAMILIAR

- Use photos that give an idea of what the venue and people will be like.
- Include images that show things that are different to sport/fitness as they know it, such as chillout zones.
- Connect with teenagers through their parents. For example, you could offer a half price place for a daughter to come with their mum.
- Work with trusted organisations in the area such as The Prince's Trust.
- Offer prizes or discounts for referring or coming with a friend.

### INCLUDED NOT SPOTLIGHTED

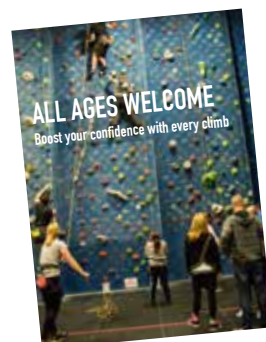
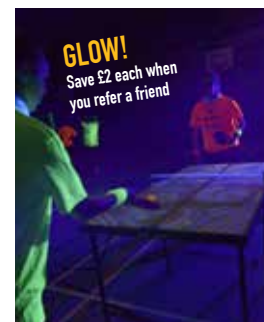
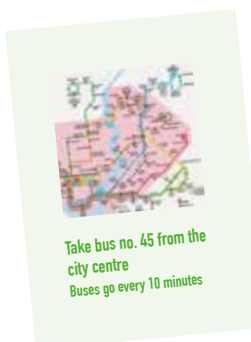
- Use language that reassures around who will be there and what the mix of ages is likely to be.
- Highlight that no experience is needed and that it's ok to go at your own pace and to take as many timeouts as you need.
- Use pictures that highlight individual effort rather than teamwork. Show people doing the activity in their own way rather than everyone doing something in perfect unison.

### PLAY WITH A PURPOSE

- Focus on benefits that connect activities with immediate priorities such as coping with bullying or switching off and feeling free.
- Deliver messages and connect with young people through games workshops, organisations helping them with life goals or charities associated with providing down-time.

### ON MY TERMS

- Make it clear that kit is provided or that they can wear their own clothes.
- Make it easy for young people to get there by including maps, transport links and a brief checklist of anything they need to bring or wear.
- State that you can just turn up and don't have to book in advance.



## PROMOTION PRINCIPLES IN ACTION



### We had a look at how female only bootcamps are promoted in Fareham, Gosport and Eastleigh.

**BOOTCAMP**  
For all fitness levels and ages.

"Here's a brief video of our ladies only Bootcamp classes - all are held at private grounds for your maximum privacy!"

- ✓ The sessions are promoted through word of mouth via parents and then supported by a Facebook page.
- ✓ They offer a brief video to build familiarity with the venue, instructor, other people there and what the activity involves.
- ✓ The sessions are framed as being suitable for all fitness levels and ages. 'Suitable for beginners' is voiced over.
- ✓ They offer a 'daughter comes half price with mum' discount, which reassures that they won't be compared to other people their age.
- ✓ The sessions are described as being 'held in private grounds for your maximum privacy', which makes it sound like a safe and non-judgemental environment.



# MAINTAINING HEALTHY HABITS

## Habits are held in place by a stable context

There is a risk that, when an activity ends, our audience will lapse back into previous inactive habits. Instructors and intermediaries play a critical role in bridging the gap between the current activity and what's next.

### CROSS-SELL ACTIVITIES

Cross-sell activities you think individuals would like, particularly if they are run or organised by someone familiar.

### DIRECT THEM TO ALTERNATIVES

Signpost individuals to alternative sessions and give practical or emotional support to help them get started.

### HIGHLIGHT SESSIONS WITH SIMILARITIES

Direct individuals to suitable activities that are being delivered in the same venue and/or at the same time to help them sustain their active behaviours.

"If someone had helped me find an all girls rugby team in Year 7 I would have kept going, but I didn't know where to look so completely stopped."

Female, aged 15, Gosport

"At archery or in active tutorial sessions, I'll mention other activities they could try. I'll even offer to meet them at the first session or at the induction, just so they know there will be someone there they know."

Sportmaker, South Downs College



Share your thoughts @EnergiseMe\_

Thanks to The Behavioural Architects, Sport England and all the young people who participated in the research.

Delve deeper into the insight that sparked the principles in this guide in [Understanding Vulnerable 14 - 19 year-olds](#).

If you want to design activities for this audience, get in touch. Let's work together to get teenagers more active.

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LOTTERY FUNDED