

**“I [...] got out of some sort of downwards spiral.”**

*Ethnographic research on the support given by Back to Basic to youth in vulnerable situations*



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## **Abstract**

In this thesis I examine youth who come from vulnerable situations that get help from a youth empowerment program called Back to Basic. Within this organization they try to help youth who ‘get stuck’ in their daily lives by coaching them using experiential learning and system-orientation. Youth and their families get help with improving communication, learning life skills and focusing on their futures in terms of work or school. Back to Basic notices that many youth that struggle are from divorced families. Therefore this research specifically focuses on participating youth from divorced families. I look into their lives, their vulnerable situations and how Back to Basic helps them. Throughout this study I consider theoretical approaches of youth empowerment, social support, resilience, coping and social vulnerability. I analyse the working methods of Back to Basic and see how these are put to practice. This study combines theory with empirical data from interviews and participation in Back to Basic meetings.

Keywords: *social vulnerability, youth empowerment, social support, resilience, coping, experiential learning.*



## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis is the result of a lengthy period of preparation, research and writing. The journey started a year ago when I looked into organizations that I would like to cooperate with. After having done research last year I decided that I wanted this research to have more societal relevance. Therefore I initiated a search for an organization that I could help by doing research for them. However, finding such an organization turned out to be quite difficult. In the beginning of the academic year, in September I had my first meetings and I met one of the initiators of Back to Basic. I started creating some first ideas of what I could research and how I could combine helping Back to Basic with my own interests and anthropology. Bit by bit the idea of researching within youth tracks or throughout the whole organization grew. I started my fieldwork period and kept adjusting my scope. This eventually led me to studying youth in vulnerable positions from divorced families.

Without the help of some people throughout the process of this thesis I could not have written it. First of all I want to thank Back to Basic, the two initiators, the coaches and above all the participants for letting me in and helping me. Even though some of you, both coaches and participants, probably did not understand why I wanted to be present for so many occasions this helped me a lot so I could get a holistic perspective of the organization and all its elements. Thank you for showing interest in what anthropology is, for challenging me in discussions on feminism and for having a laugh. To the youth; thanks for talking to me, for opening up about your life to yet another person and for keeping me up to date on all the Dutch rap music and slang. Furthermore I want to thank my supervisor Yke Eijkemans. Thank you for all the enthusiasm you showed towards my topic and my ethnographic accounts of it. You helped me a lot with your feedback and new ideas. Lastly I want to thank my personal feedback team for helping out in the end, thank you Marinde, mama, Tim and of course baby Saar for smiling at my screen.





## **Introduction**

I come in early, I always come in early because of the public transport system. I enter the college for animal related and nutritional studies. I take out my laptop and wait at the table near the front desk of the school for either Thijs or his coach to arrive. While sitting there Thijs' guidance counsellor walks by, she stops to talk to me for a bit. She has been helping Thijs to look at study options for next year. The counsellor predicts that Thijs will not come, she says this while checking her WhatsApp seeing that Thijs has not been online since late last night. In the meantime Thijs' Back to Basic coach comes in, considering Thijs is not there the coach starts making some phone calls to other clients of his. After having checked my mail and schedule for the week Thijs approaches, he is wearing black jeans, black Nike Air Max sneakers and a green sweater with his hoodie on. While lounging into the chair next to me he puts his can of Red Bull on the table. I ask about his weekend, he answers with his earphones in that he had not been sleeping much since he had been working at Dominos and going out. To pass some time before his planned conversation with his coach Thijs goes outside to smoke a cigarette<sup>1</sup>.

Thijs (17) lives with his grandparents in a little town a bit further from his friends and work. He is the only youngster included in this research that got separated from his parents by his own will, he does not wish to have any contact with his own parents. In the conversations I had with Thijs I learn that other than the weekly meetings with his Back to Basic coach, Thijs does not go to school anymore. He was asked not to come to class as he was not interested in completing his nutritional studies and he only distracted others. However, Thijs is only 17 which means he is getting in trouble with the school attendance officer for not taking any classes. The carelessness that Thijs portrays regarding his meetings and his school is recurring for the youngsters of Back to Basic during my research.

## **Relevance and research question**

This thesis, and the research it is based on, stems from both societal and academic interest. Both these interests are discussed in this section, starting with the societal debate.

Several authors, specifically in psychological literature, have described the importance of family influence on children and youth. One depends on ones parents to get raised, to learn

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<sup>1</sup> Meeting at Helicon with Thijs, 18-02-2019, Helmond

life skills and to prepare for an independent future (Laumann-Billings & Emery 2000, Furlong 2013, Cumsille and Epstein 1994). A lack of membership to a support group is found to be associated with increased problem behaviour (Bender & Losel 1997, 672). Besides that, children who recently experienced parental divorce or separation are at a relatively high risk of developing behavioural or emotional problems (Harland et al. 2002, 176). This might be because of stress; parental divorce is considered to be a stressful life event for children and stress causes problem behaviour (Smith & Carlston 1997, 232). There are different types of problem behaviour which sometimes leads to school dropouts (Rumberger 1987, 110; Jimerson et al. 2000, 543), substance abuse or minor illegal activity like drinking, smoking and using drugs (Donovan & Jessor 1985, 890). On top of leading to more problem behaviour, having a divorced family could lead to a lack of social support.

Whenever the issues with problem behaviour in divorced families become too much, there might be a need to get support from outside. An example of outside (social) support is a youth empowerment program. A youth empowerment program helps to cope with life stresses and provides tools to increase self-esteem (Smith & Charlston 1997, 231). Learning how to cope with these issues will help youth prepare for their future. Preparing for an independent and joyful future is something that the empowering youth care organization Back to Basic is focused on. Within their work Back to Basic found that the majority of participating youth come from divorced families. The combination of the psychological literature pointing towards the development of problem behaviour in relation to divorced parents and Back to Basic seeing many divorced families gives this research its societal interest. Since the research was conducted at Back to Basic who expressed their concern for youth coming from divorced families, this research will be relevant to their program too. Based on the findings and conclusions of the research the youth empowerment organization might be able to incorporate new program elements to deal with the different roles of support, increasing resilience or coping with vulnerability for youngsters from divorced families. By helping this organization get more detailed ideas of what is going on within the lives of youth, the organization will be able to help youngsters enhance further development within society. Furthermore, topics of youth care and divorced families are not only of importance within literature but also within the Netherlands nowadays. This is seen in the national statistics. Due to separation and divorce 29,6% of all 15 year-olds do not live with both parents in 2017. This number has increased tremendously in the last 20 years (CBS 2018). When looking at youth receiving youth care it is noticed that in 2016 there were 373.975 youth from the age of 0 to 18 years old who received youth care in the Netherlands. To get a clear image, in that year

there were 3.431.000 youth between 0 and 18 years old (CBS 2018). This means that the percentage of youth receiving special care is approximately 10,9% in the Netherlands. This care includes different types of youth care, like placements, foster care, family focused care and care in the neighbourhood (CBS 2018). The issues regarding problem behaviour, parental separation or divorce and youth care provided me with several reasons to research this topic.

The academic reasoning for researching youth in vulnerable situations came from anthropological literature and theory. The literature study started with theories on the relation between divorced families, problem behaviour and social support (Harland et al. 2002, 176; Bender & Losel 1997, 672; Smith & Carlston 1997, 232). Since issues of divorce and problem behaviour are mostly the psychological conditions that these youngsters are in, I focused on social support. This eventually led me to vulnerability. Considering social support youth are surrounded by closed networks of family and friends (Lin et al. 1979, 109). However, all youth in this research come from divorced or separated families. The change caused by divorce means a difference in the social structure of someone's life which can result in social vulnerability. When looking into vulnerability I found that dictionary descriptions describe vulnerability as susceptibility to harm and being in need of care (Faas 2016, 14). Within anthropology vulnerability is often conceptually associated with poverty (Cheney 2010, 5) and/or dealing with natural disasters (Faas 2016; Colten 2008). However, vulnerability is not only seen in these contexts. According to Blaikie et al. vulnerability "involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone's life and livelihood is put at risk by a discrete and identifiable event in nature or society" (1994, 9). This identifiable event in my research is the split of the parents and therefore the family. Furthermore, vulnerability is seen as a process in society in which a changing event can cause insecurity to an individual's, families' or communities' well-being (Alwang et al. 2001, 18). Within vulnerability a threat and how to respond to this threat can be distinguished. A distinction can be made between economic vulnerability, as tied to poverty, and social vulnerability. Social vulnerability is then a combination of social factors and environmental risk. A possible solution to vulnerability is seen in the use of assets (Alwang et al. 2001, 19). Moser (1998, 3) found that having more assets can lead to having less economic or social vulnerability. These assets can be tangible or intangible (Moser 1998, 3). Within this research I mostly focus on social vulnerability which can be increased or decreased through the presence or absence of intangible assets. These can be assets like education, health, social networks or social capital (Moser 1998, 3). There are two examples given in which social vulnerability is decreased. These examples come from

assets of household relations with little conflict and having an active support network. A person with a mix of these kinds of assets is most likely to be better protected to external shock and change (Moser 1998, 4). However, vulnerability is never applicable to only one individual, it exists within a collective (Alwang et al. 2001, 18-9). Therefore vulnerability can be identified in the family situations of the youth of Back to Basic. They are dealing with social vulnerability in the collective of their families in which they do not always have the intangible assets of social ties to decrease the social vulnerability. It is suggested that the families do not possess enough of these assets themselves since they seek help at an organization like Back to Basic.

Before youth and their families seek help of an organization like Back to Basic they usually try to handle the vulnerable situation themselves. This can be done by ways of coping or due to resilience. Resilience is the ability to positively respond to stressful situations (Jarrett 1997, 219) or to successfully adapt in face of adversity (Barrios 2016, 28). Another way of handling situations is by coping. In anthropology the adaptation in human behaviour in anticipation of the future is seen as coping (Bennett 1976, 848-851). Coping skills or strategies are behavioural or mental ways of dealing with a specific situation. There are problem-focused strategies of coping and emotion-focused strategies. This is to either deal with the problem that arises in the situation, which people with high self-esteem and perceived control are predicted to do. Or to deal with the emotion that arises due to the situation, which is then what people with low self-esteem and perceived control are predicted to do (Thoits 1995, 60). In this research I have found several ways of coping that youngsters use. However, youth can also learn coping skills from others. Learning coping skills to deal with your life and to be yourself, are part of empowerment (Thoits 1995, 60). This is the kind of empowerment that Back to Basic uses in their program.

As mentioned before youth in this research have their own closed networks of family and friends but they are found to be in vulnerable situations which might be because of a lack of intangible assets like social capital. Social capital is having closed and open social networks and using the support that comes from both these ties (Lin et al. 1979, 109). Youth can invest in their social capital by developing different social ties. This investment can be done by reaching out for help to improve your life and focus on the future (Lin 1999, 4). There are possibilities to reach out to open, more socially diverse, networks. By doing this youth, and their families, are bridging social capital (Putnam 2000 in Beugelsdijk & Smulders 2003, 2). Back to Basic can be one of these new socially open links. Creating new links with

other people or institutions is seen as a mechanism to enhance individual coping and decrease vulnerability (Jarrett 1997, 219).

In this thesis I look into the lives of youth participating in a youth empowerment program Back to Basic. I research the socially vulnerable positions that these youth are in and how the program helps them to be resilient and cope with their situations. By doing this I try to answer my main question: “How does Back to Basic provide social support for youth in vulnerable positions coming from divorced families?”

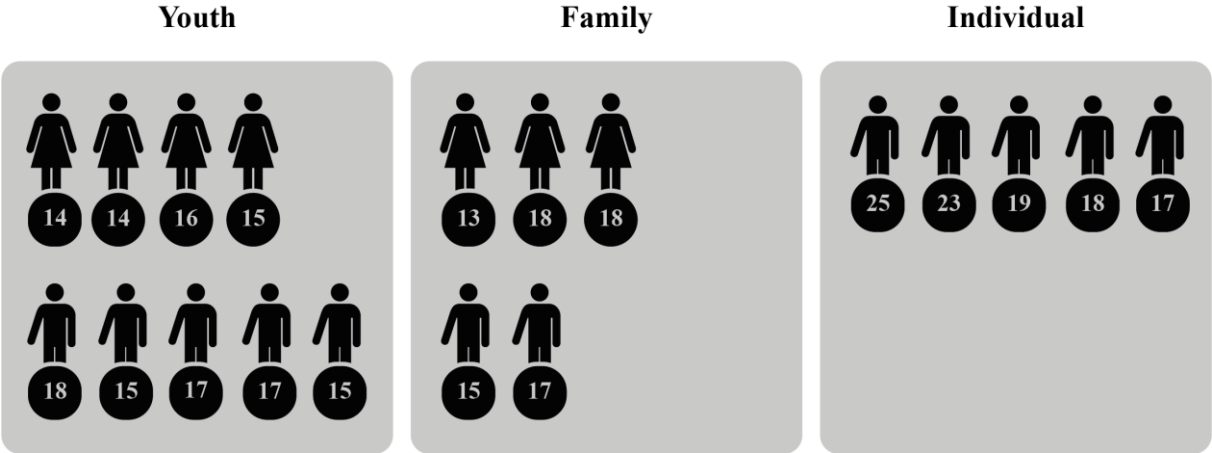
## **Context, methods and population**

This thesis is written using empirical data from a period of fieldwork research at the youth care organization Back to Basic, in Eindhoven. This organization provides customized care for youth with whatever difficulties they have. When asking the organization how I could help them by doing research for them one of the initiators expressed his interest in youth from divorced families. According to him 95% of all youngsters participating in Back to Basic come from divorced families. He wanted to have more insight in this specific group. He expressed his concerns for the role that the parents play in the lives of the participating youth. Back to Basic’s interest combined with the literature on the link between problem behaviour and divorce (Harland et al. 2002, 176) made me specifically research youth from divorced or separated families.

I started this research in September of 2018 by exploring the options of doing research at Back to Basic. Eventually this resulted in meeting the first group of youth in the beginning of January. My period of fieldwork officially started on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January. During the first weeks I made a list of all the participating youngsters coming from divorced families. I contacted coaches to meet up with youngsters and asked outdoor coaches to join in on meetings. After that I did one on one interviews, joined house visits and participated in group meetings and several-day trips. Since the participants lived across the Netherlands and also the meetings were spread out, I did not have one specific research location. Throughout the course of this research I have used different anthropological and ethnographic methods. I have conducted fourteen more formal in-depth interviews. On top of that I have had a lot of different informal conversations. The Back to Basic meetings I have participated in varied from weekly coaching moments at homes or schools (which I joined at least eleven times), to one day or several-day meetings/trips. I especially got a lot of data by participating in a four day meeting in Friesland and a seven day meeting in Norway. During all these meetings I

used participant observation and informal conversations to get information. I wrote down everything that I noticed in terms of interactions, exercises and help that coaches provided to the participants. While doing this I tried to stick as much to the youngsters’ stories and their points of view as possible. My attempt to stick to their story aligns with Malinowski’s call for anthropologists to grasp “the natives point of view”. This is done to strive to give everyone their own voice. Other anthropologists also ask to give children (or in my case youngsters) and their vulnerability more of a conceptual framework from their point of view (Bluebond-Langer and Korbin 2007, 245). I strive to achieve this by combining the native point of view of youth with conceptual ideas of resilience, social support, coping and vulnerability. I research youngsters from divorced or separated families as a background characteristic but do not suggest to make a comparison to other youth with families that are together.

To give a clear overview of my research population I will provide some background information. During the period between the end of January till the 14<sup>th</sup> of May I met up with 28 youngsters and some of their family members. Out of the 28 Back to Basic youngsters that I met, nine were not from divorced or separated families, therefore I will focus on the other nineteen and their families. The group of nineteen youngsters is a diverse group on multiple levels. As seen from the image below their ages differ with youngsters between the ages of 13 to 25 years old. Secondly all nineteen youngsters come from the three different tracks that Back to Basic offers to youth; youth, family and individual tracks. Nine youngsters are participating in youth tracks. Five follow a family program and five youngsters have individual tracks.. The meaning of these different programs is explained in the next chapter. Within the research population there are seven female and twelve male participants. Naturally their backgrounds and the issues they deal with are all different.



My research participants from different Back to Basic tracks including male/female divide and age

## **Reflection and ethical concerns**

From the start of this research I was tied to Back to Basic as a researcher. I met all participants through the organization by joining house visits or meetings. This sometimes led participants to believe that I was part of Back to Basic, which I noticed as they referred to me as ‘you all of Back to Basic’. However, some youth clearly saw the difference between me and the coaches. One girl even mentioned specifically confiding in me since I was an innocent bystander so it would be easier to talk to me. I was hoping to position myself somewhere in the middle between coaches and participants. However, I knew that whenever I saw or heard something serious that the coaches did not know about yet, I should let them know. Being in the middle worked since I got to have informal conversations with both coaches and participants. However it got difficult when one girl started cursing at me as well and when I felt like I needed to contribute one way or another. As a researcher also the pressure from one of the initiators was difficult; he expected me to be useful to them instead of just being costly and time consuming. In these situations I tried to stay as calm as possible and I attempted to talk about it later to set some clear expectations.

This research was done in a group that is not only theoretically socially vulnerable, but also vulnerable in terms of their position in society regarding, among others, the police. Since I do not want to incriminate any of my research participants I ensured their anonymity every time I met new people or if I started an interview. Therefore the names in this thesis are all aliases. The numbers in between brackets after the names stand for the age of the youth. Even though I knew this group would be difficult to research in terms of sensitive information I was shocked to see how sensitive it really was. Not all youth decided to confide in me during conversations, which I understand. However, some were really honest with me after asking if this thesis will be read by others. To give them confidence and to ensure them of their anonymous and safe participation, I decided to not publish this thesis on the database of the university and only show it to those who need to see it. This includes my supervisor, the second reviewer and those to whom it may concern working at Back to Basic.

## **Outline of this thesis**

Besides this introduction this thesis will include four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter of this thesis provides background information on Back to Basic. It describes the requests for help that youngsters have, Back to Basic’s goals and aims, its working methods and the different tracks.



The second chapter builds on the first in terms of the lives of the youngsters. I theorize social vulnerability in families, trauma and social vulnerability and dysfunctional coping. I add to these theories by providing examples of my research population.

In the third chapter I focus on Back to Basic's support. I consider the theoretical approaches of empowerment, positive coping, resilience and social support and look at ways that Back to Basic uses this. On top of that I go through the methods again that were discussed in the first chapter. I elaborate on these methods by providing examples of how those are put to practice.

The last chapter of this thesis discusses the promised results of Back to Basic and the experiences that youngsters and their families have with Back to Basic.

Finally, the last section of this thesis is dedicated towards a conclusion of all my findings throughout my research. I attempt to answer my main question "How does Back to Basic provide social support for youth in vulnerable positions coming from divorced families?" as thoroughly as possible. Lastly I make a suggestion towards using this information and further research.

## **Chapter 1 - The Back to Basic program**

Throughout this thesis I attempt to discuss elements of Back to Basic and the youngsters lives as thoroughly as possible. I do this by providing examples of the lives of multiple youngsters or of a situation during the program. However, to create a more continuous image of a Back to Basic journey I start every chapter with examples of Priscilla's life. I choose Priscilla since I met her several times and I got to see her in different settings. Therefore I can sketch the most holistic image of Back to Basic using Priscilla's track. To help understand her life I provide some general information. Priscilla is a fourteen year old girl, she has black, long and curly hair and she talks proudly of her partial Surinam heritage. At the moment Priscilla lives with her mother. After getting expelled from her last school Priscilla now goes to a special secondary school for problematized youth in a neighbouring village. In the past Priscilla was taken from her mother because her mother was considered unfit to take care of Priscilla and her siblings. Even though Priscilla is allowed to live with her mother now, her mother has not been allowed to take back all of her kids; the two youngest boys still live with one of her ex-boyfriends, the father of one of the boys. Around Christmas one and a half year ago Priscilla got back in touch with her biological father. Priscilla's father and mother do not get along and cannot cooperate. Below the description of the start of Priscilla's track follows.

It is the first night I participate in a Back to Basic meeting and the first time I meet Priscilla. I enter the gym in the church where Back to Basic's office is situated. In this gym I find half a circle of chairs facing a presentation screen. On these chairs I see youngsters and adults taking place. There are six youngsters, two girls and four boys. Most of them took two adults with them, Priscilla is the only one who took just her mother. Besides the participants and me there are two initiators, five coaches, and one intern present. I can feel some tension and nervousness in the room. As we all sit down the two initiators of Back to Basic start their presentation. They start discussing the idea behind the program and the type of track that these youngsters will have. The youth are going on a six month journey during which they will get weekly house visits and five group meetings. The initiators and coaches start asking questions to get an idea of what the youth and their parents expect from Back to Basic and which elements they want help with. At first parents start mentioning what their children should change but the coaches try to challenge the parents to think of their own needed changes as well. After giving it some thought the parents mention that they want to have better communication and more understanding towards their children. When asking the

children what they want, the room goes silent. Daniël (15) is too scared to say anything *en groupe*. Even when discussing his contract separately later on in the evening he does not dare to say anything other than whispering in his mother's ear. Priscilla does not seem to be as shy, she is joking with her mother how the two of them are more like friends rather than having a 'normal' parent-child relationship. Priscilla mentions wanting help with getting more confident about herself and having more self-respect.

During the rest of this evening I get some first ideas of what Back to Basic is all about. The two initiators include some basic principles in their presentation; like how Back to Basic wants to help connect people more. The coaches provide tools for the participants to deal with certain issues in their lives but the main idea is that the youngsters and their parents do all the work. Back to Basic is simply there to encourage and coach them. The coaches emphasize that within the group, and within Back to Basic in general, everyone deserves a spot and no one has to do anything alone.

To help remind them of this evening the youngsters are asked to pick one of the six rocks on the table in front of them. They will have to keep this rock in a place where they will see it every day, they then need to take it to the first group meeting so they can use this rock in an exercise. Before picking this rock one coach stresses that the youngsters do not have to worry about which rock to pick because the rock has already picked them, they simply have to grab it. I can see some confusion and ignorance on the youngsters faces while walking up to the table in the front and grabbing a rock.

After having explained the goals, procedure and rules of Back to Basic and this youth track, the two initiators hand out contracts that the youngsters get to read through and sign under the supervision of a coach. These contracts state that the youngsters will participate in Back to Basic and they will stick to the rules. One of the initiators later mentions that the contracts are purposefully handed to the youngsters so they get some responsibility. Some youth take the contract to read and sign it, while some immediately pass this on to their parents, other parents simply take the contract from their child<sup>2</sup>.

The situational description above gives some first ideas of what Back to Basic is, who participates and how it works. Continuing, this chapter contains a detailed description of Back to Basic. I start with an elaboration on the requests for help that Back to Basic gets. Second, I

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<sup>2</sup> First information meeting, 07-01-2019, Eindhoven

move towards the goals and aims of Back to Basic. Third, I discuss the working methods. Lastly this chapter covers the different tracks that Back to Basic has to offer.

## **Requests for help**

The starting point of the personal Back to Basic journey is always the request that these youngsters or their families have for help. The coaches visit the participants at home, or they come to the office for a first meeting. This is the intake in which they set some first goals of what to work on. Of course these goals can be adjusted or added to during the track. I elaborate on some examples of the requests for help that I came across in my fieldwork.

First of all I want to point out that none of the youngsters came up with the idea of going to Back to Basic themselves. The idea was suggested by parents, school or other family members. Sometimes the youngsters agreed with the need for help and they came up with their specific request for help themselves. Other times someone else told the youngster what they had to work on. There are a lot of different situations that youth want help with themselves or need help with according to their surroundings. Most of these situations are behavioural changes like aggression, and self-esteem or positivity issues. Often these issues relate to school. Jesse (17) and Mitch (18) both say they wanted help with being themselves again; getting rid of the mask they put on. Rik (17) is struggling with anger issues and having a restless head. He talks about what he learned from Back to Basic so far. “Emotions, I didn’t allow myself to have them, I would hide them. I hadn’t balled my eyes out in ages and I did not do that at Back to Basic. But (...) they saw that I was hiding it, they asked me why. I told them I thought it was a weakness of myself. (...) They told me it wasn’t so I cried for half an hour without any reason”<sup>3</sup>. Working on his emotional issues was the reason behind the request for help for Rik’s mother.

On top of these emotional and behavioural issues all youngsters have some type of difficulty with their relationship with their parents. The issues with their parents usually concerns a lot of fighting, verbally and sometimes physically. Besides this fighting some youth deal with a certain kind of trauma coming from violent (home) situations. This puts them in a vulnerable position. Improving relationships, communication or ways of responding to each other is therefore a frequent request for help that Back to Basic gets. Furthermore I have heard a lot of youth say that they have difficulties with setting boundaries or limits and making choices. They mention that they often feel like they do not have options to choose

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<sup>3</sup> Interview Rik, 22-03-2019, Oostkapelle

since their guardians, or parents make them do something. Creating an overview of the possibilities that exist within the limits that youth have is another situation that Back to Basic deals with.

Getting expelled or put in separate classes or schools with adjusted schedules are some practical examples of situations that youth ‘get stuck’ with. This sometimes results in skipping school which then turns into issues with the school attendance officer. Back to Basic takes these kind of requests for help in which they try to work towards going back to school or finding a suitable school or work option for someone.

## **Goals and aims**

Back to Basic is a youth care coaching program meant for youngsters and their families whenever they ‘get stuck’ for whatever reason. In the first conversation I have with one of the initiators he tells me the reasoning behind starting Back to Basic. The initiator was a police officer for years and he felt like he always came “too late” when it comes to issues regarding youth. He felt that whenever the police got involved the situation had already gone too far. For this reason he decided to design a program to intervene and help youth with their issues before they get “too big”<sup>4</sup>. On Back to Basic<sup>5</sup>’s website there is a variety of examples of situations that might get out of hand that they can help with. Some of these examples are fights at home, struggles in communication at school and threats of suspension at school or out-of-home placement.

Whenever youth or their families go to Back to Basic for help there will be coaching available with the motto of ‘learning by doing’<sup>6</sup>. When looking at their website, Back to Basic sets clear expectations and aims. They state; “Back to Basic helps break through old patterns so parents and youngsters can create a clear and realistic image for their future once again. The focus is on improving the communication between youngsters and their surroundings. Negative behavioural patterns are broken and new, healthy, behaviour replaces them”<sup>7</sup>. Examples of those old patterns and other issues that youth want help with were addressed in the previous paragraph. Due to these issues and the way Back to Basic aims to handle this, a comparison to enhancing resilience can be made. Resilience is the ability to positively respond to stressful situations (Jarrett 1997, 219) or to successfully adapt in face of adversity

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<sup>4</sup> First meeting initiator, 03-09-2019, Eindhoven

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.btobasic.nl/jongeren-traject/> accessed on 18-06-2019

<sup>6</sup> Leren door te doen

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.btobasic.nl/> accessed on 18-06-2019.

(Barrios 2016, 28). The concept of resilience will be discussed more thoroughly in the third chapter.

The help Back to Basic provides seems to align with ideas of youth empowerment. Empowerment is based on the idea of giving someone more control over their own lives (Russel et al. 2009, 891). This idea of empowerment fits with how Back to Basic describes itself because of their focus on youth's independence and developing skills to be future-proof. Within anthropology and in interdisciplinary studies empowerment is mostly seen in the context of women's empowerment. Empowerment is then considered to be about the importance for individuals to gain new capabilities. Besides learning these capabilities people should also feel like they are justified to use these new capabilities to their own advantage. In doing this there is an increase in the ability to control your own destiny even when others have a different path laid out for you (Mason in Narayan 2005, 90). By creating these new capabilities and utilizing them, empowerment is about the expansion of freedom of action and choice (Malhotra & Schuler 2005, 71). Empowerment at a psychological level, which is mostly used in youth empowerment according to Russel et al. (2009, 893), is about your belief in competence and efforts to control and understand social forces to have a behavioural, emotional and cognitive impact. These beliefs help youth get control over their lives.

Smith and Carlson (1997, 231) describe goals that are similar to empowerment. These are goals like enhancing personal resources to be able to cope with life stresses, providing tools to increase self-esteem and help with ways to manage negative feelings around life stress. Smith and Carlson (1997, 231) call this social work intervention but since the goals are similar to empowerment I will combine both conceptualizations in this research and I will call Back to Basic a youth empowerment program. The ways in which Back to Basic puts this empowerment into practice are discussed more thoroughly in the next chapters.

### **Back to Basic's working methods**

Within their different tracks Back to Basic works with different methods. I mention those methods and their corresponding theories here but I elaborate on how it is put into practice in chapter three.

In the first conversations and on their website it becomes clear that experiential learning is a central method to Back to Basic's approach. They use experiential learning to teach youth certain skills and to let them experience these skills first hand. In this process they push youth and their families out of their comfort zones to have them participate in new

experiences. The idea of using experiential learning comes from the experiential learning theory of Kolb (Kolb & Kolb 2005, 194). The theory looks at learning as a process in which they create knowledge through the transformation of experience. They believe that knowledge is generated from a combination of transforming and grasping certain experiences. Theorists of the experiential learning theory consider experiencing central to human learning and development. During experiential learning the learner is supposed to touch all the bases of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting (Kolb & Kolb 2005, 194). Back to Basic initiators explain putting this experiential style of learning into action by taking youngsters on trips and going outdoors. Throughout my research I have seen coaches challenge youngsters in doing things they normally do not do to see how they react and handle the situation. Their responses are then used to reflect back upon. This is done by evaluating activities after they end and by using a manual. The goals the youngsters set in this manual for the next time are then also approached through experiential learning. How this experiential learning is put into practice, including sketches of situations, will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter three.

Apart from experiential learning Back to Basic also strives to work with a system-orientation approach. This idea is based on learning from someone's background and social environment to then understand and treat a patient (Jessurun 1987, 3). The system-orientated approach is a circular model of everything having influence on everything. There is a focus on patterns of behaviour instead of single events. The coherence of the behavioural patterns with a person's surrounding is evaluated (Jessurun 1987, 2). Within Back to Basic the coaches take the influences of the family life into account and sometimes they include the family life of parents when they were growing up. This might help coaches with insights into the parents behaviour towards their children. Patterns of behaviour, interaction and communication within a family are seen through games and assignments.

The different coaches and their approaches to youth at Back to Basic can be seen as the third method. The coaches at Back to Basic differ per track. Every group of youth or every family track has a different set of coaches. Therefore I have met up with a lot of different teams of coaches throughout my research. During meetings the coaches get together every morning to set a goal and approach for the day. These moments are also seen throughout the day so that coaches can inform one another about the developments and behaviour of all youngsters. Sometimes tips on how to approach someone are shared. Coaches also reflect on how they are feeling and their energy levels. Overall I have noticed that coaches are really friendly towards each other, the youngsters, parents and me. There is a lot of room for making jokes and having a good time. Examples of this are provided in chapter three. The importance

of establishing a positive client-staff relationship within youth empowerment is emphasized in literature as well (Harder et al. 2012, 315). This emphasis aligns with other findings saying that like in social support, adults also play an important part in youth empowerment programs (Hilfinger Messias et al. 2005, 320). Hilfinger Messias et al. (2005, 335) found that the reason for using adult control was to take a step back so youth had the chance to step up and succeed. They state that a general theme that is important within youth development and empowerment is to give them opportunities to apply control and power over situations (Hilfinger Messias et al. 2005, 335). This is done by Back to Basic through handing out contracts to youth and giving them authority in doing groceries or cooking dinner.

The fourth method I discuss is the manual. To me it seemed like the different coaches all had specific points of focus. Therefore the help that youth get differs depending on which coach they get. This is mostly seen on the topics that coaches bring up and behaviour that they respond to like issues with confidence, bullying, violence or anger. Sometimes these different approaches towards the work or the youngsters also result in disagreement between the team of coaches. A tool the coaches use to have some guideline and general scope is the manual. By using this manual they ensure that all the youngsters get more or less the same support. The manual includes topics to discuss and plans to make or evaluate. During week or weekend meetings of youth tracks the coaches and participants work with this manual in the morning to create a focus when starting the day, and in the evening to evaluate the day in an one on one conversation. Some themes that come up are respect, working together, discipline and listening. On top of that the manual is used to set goals for oneself and to make plans of how to achieve these goals. In the whole process of Back to Basic the coaches make it clear to the participants that they are the ones doing the work. Back to Basic is simply there to ask some questions, give some direction or handout some tools. In chapter three I elaborate further on the tools they hand youngsters.

### **Back to Basic tracks**

There are different programs in which the methods are used and the goals are reached. Back to Basic focuses on youth from ages 12 to 18 and on young adults ages 18 to 25. For young adults the focus is mostly on facilitating an independent lifestyle while for youth the focus is more on their current environment. Whenever Back to Basic gets contacted for help they first create a clear image of what kind of help is needed in the intake. Based on this, they advise on



what kind of track to follow. Of course participants or parents also have a say in their preferences and they get to make the final decision.

The first track is a youth track. I have participated in and met youngsters from two youth tracks during my research period. In the beginning of this chapter, the procedure of a six month youth track with five group meetings and weekly house visits was explained. Every youth track starts with such an informational night with parents. Besides that, the parents are involved in house visits, in special workshops for parents and in the parent-child meeting. There are some general goals that Back to Basic sets for these tracks like improving communication, learning skills for daily life, prevention or shortening of out-of-home placements and staying in school/work or going back. For the youth track there are some specific goals of being able to cope with aggressive or emotional issues, enhancing self-esteem, and having more fun and peacefulness at home, school and with friends. In the intake at the start of a track youth and their parents or guardians can also set goals for themselves.

The second type of track in which I met youngsters and their families are family tracks. A family track takes four months in total. In this track there is an intake, house visits (usually weekly) and there are four meetings in which several families in the track get together. These four meetings are one or two day meetings in which families get pulled out of their everyday lives. These meetings are done outside of daily distractors and usually take place outdoors in nature. Examples of activities for these meetings are hiking, a daytrip on boats and climbing. Goals of family tracks are partially the same as in the youth track. These are goals of improving communication between family members, learning skills for daily life, prevention or shortening of out of home placements and staying in school/work or going back.

A third type of track that I included in my research at Back to Basic is an individual track. Individual tracks can be just with one youngster or with a family. During my research I have seen a family in which Rik (17) first participated in a youth track after which his mother requested a family track as well. However, since the mother has three children, Rik, a daughter and another disabled daughter, it made more sense to start an individual family track. By doing this the track can be modified over and over to fit the needs of this specific family. Other individual tracks are done if someone's situation is too complex, if someone's age is too different from other participants or if there is more need for coaching after a youth track. Individual tracks are customized, which means that the goals, meetings and activities differ every time. On their website Back to Basic<sup>8</sup> states that an individual track can include

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.btobasic.nl/individueel-traject/> accessed on 17-06-2019.

activities like hiking for several days or going on boats. However, in my research I have found that individual tracks usually involve a lot of house visits and the occasional (day) activity.

There are a couple of other programs that Back to Basic offers; such as a track for schools, educational holidays for families and educational holidays for youth. I did not come across youth in these programs and these were also not mentioned by initiators or coaches which is why I did not include these programs in this research.

After having established some background knowledge on what Back to Basic aims to do, I focus on the complexities of the situations these youth are in. I look into concepts of vulnerability and negative coping, which I connect to the lives of Back to Basic's participants.



## Chapter 2 - Social vulnerability and coping

Priscilla (14) lives with her mother now after having lived with her grandparents for seven years. She left her grandparents' house because there were too many fights. According to Priscilla her aunt was intervening too much in Priscilla's life and her grandparents were letting her aunt do that. Priscilla was getting mad and going against her aunt but her grandmother stood up for her aunt and not for her which lead to more fights with her grandparents. Eventually Priscilla asked her legal guardian if she could leave her grandparents and live somewhere else. When asking more about her time at her grandparents' Priscilla brakes down in tears. In Priscilla's words it is a miracle that she got to live with her mother again, because it was said before that that could never happen. Because of her move, Priscilla and her mom had to go to the judge some months ago to see whether the judge found it safe enough to keep Priscilla with her mother, with supervision of a legal guardian. The judge ruled in Priscilla and her mother's favour. Priscilla was really happy that she could stay with her mother, her Back to Basic coach felt a bit conflicted by it.

When Priscilla's coach and I come to visit, Priscilla's mother seems drunk and we smell alcohol. She denies that she has been drinking but she does admit that she has been smoking marihuana, which she has been doing since she was 14 years old. Priscilla's mother is temporarily sleeping in the living room since her son and his girlfriend came to stay with them for a bit. Their stay means that there is not enough money to get food on the table for everyone every day. The mother does not have a job and is unfit to work according to the coach. They get weekly payments from the government and they can get food packages if they have transportation to pick them up, which they don't. When I want to go to the bathroom there is no toilet paper in the house<sup>9</sup>.

All in all Priscilla's coach questions whether this is a safe environment for a 14 year old girl to grow up. This home situation therefore provides clear examples of how vulnerable the situation of Priscilla is due to practical elements like not having enough money. In my research participants I have seen more vulnerability like this.

In the introduction I presented some first ideas on social vulnerability, this chapter will build on this. I start with social vulnerability in terms of social networks and changing family structures. I provide several cases of youth dealing with vulnerability issues within their

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<sup>9</sup> Visiting Priscilla's mother, 20-02-2019, Vlissingen

family situation. Second I move towards the idea of vulnerability tied to trauma. Again, I present a case to demonstrate this. After having established social vulnerability I continue discussing the situations of youngsters and how they try to improve these situations by using coping mechanisms. In this chapter I focus on the negative side of coping; the dysfunctional coping.

### **Social vulnerability in families**

Previously some theory on social vulnerability as insecurity within a changing environment was provided. I also mentioned how social vulnerability has a collective nature (Alwang et al. 2001, 18-9) and how different tangible and intangible assets like support and social capital could be used to decrease vulnerability (Moser 1998, 3). Cutter et al. (2003, 245) identified some influential factors that increases social vulnerability which align with the asset approach. These influential factors are a lack of access to resources such as information or knowledge, and a lack of social capital. Besides this, also age and lifeline can have influence on someone's social vulnerability. This is seen by Alwang et al. (2001, 17) as well, they identified children as being more at risk of vulnerability. This is mostly because children are often seen as innocent and not always able to fend for themselves. However, within anthropology children are recently seen more and more as being their own social agents and having their own rights (Cheney 2010, 6-7). Even though children have their own rights they are somehow dependent on their surroundings. If there are changes in the collective nature of someone's surroundings, this might cause insecurity in the individual's well-being (Alwang et al. 2001, 18). These changes can be in terms of nature, but also within society. One of these societal changes that youth deal with in this research is their changing families. Due to the increase in separation and divorce there is an incline in changing family structures (Furlong 2013, 100). The changing family structure results in changing social ties which might lead to more household conflict and having a less active support network which were examples of assets that increased social vulnerability (Moser 1998, 14).

Priscilla's situation of moving from her grandparents to her mother and getting back in touch with her father is an example of a changing family structure. On top of that the fact that Priscilla's mother seems drunk and admits to smoking weed on a regular basis shows less active support. In the parent-child meeting of Back to Basic it became clear that Priscilla's mother does not provide the support that Priscilla hopes for since she did not show up. Priscilla said her mother had a hard week, they had been fighting a lot because Priscilla lied

about something she did. The night before the Back to Basic weekend Priscilla saw that her mother had cut her arms with two deep cuts. Priscilla did not know how to respond to this. She acted like she did not see it but she talked to me and a coach about how difficult it is for her that her mother is in so much pain because of what she and her brother are doing. Priscilla also emphasized several times that she felt sad about her mother not coming and being the only youngster without any parents during the meeting. This demonstrates an unanswered longing for support which is part of the lack of assets like social capital which increases vulnerability (Moser 1998, 3). On top of that the fighting shows more household conflict which also leads to more social vulnerability (Moser 1998, 14).

In general youth are considered to be more vulnerable when growing up in an unstable family (Fernandes-Alcantara 2004, 4). Several youth in this research grew up in unstable families. Amy (14) was one of them. In the course of her first Back to Basic trip Amy opens up more and more about her family life and her difficulties with her mother's new relationships. Amy's father left when she was very little, she never really had a relationship with him afterwards because her father did not pay attention to her. Amy's mother got into new relationships. At first Amy had a stepfather who physically abused her, she was not allowed to cry or show emotions. When Amy came home after school saying that she had been bullied, her stepfather would ask if she hit the other person. If Amy did not hit her bully, she would be hit by her stepfather. Eventually this man went to jail because of domestic violence. Later on her mother got a new partner, Amy did not live at home anymore by this point, since her mother was found unfit to take care of her. Consequently Amy lives in a group home. Still, she did have a good relationship with her new stepfather. He would let her into the house to see her mom even if this was not allowed and she would have good conversations with him. A couple of months ago this stepfather died because of an accident at work, Amy was left in shock. Other than the vulnerability caused by the constantly changing family life, Amy also deals with money-related issues that causes vulnerability. Amy talks about her mother wanting her debit card so she would have money. In addition Amy says she makes friends so that they will buy her cigarettes or other stuff. She uses these friends and does not give anything back to them. Using these friends might be Amy's way of dealing with the money-related issues<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Trip to Norway 25-03-2019 till 31-03-2019, Evje and surroundings

## Trauma and social vulnerability

Other than the different assets and influential factors there are more processes of change that cause insecurity and social vulnerability for both individuals and the collective. One of those societal risks is identified by Scheper-Hughes (2008, 37). She considers vulnerability in the context of trauma which we are so openly exposed to nowadays. These are traumas like rape, violence, crime and loss. Scheper-Hughes (2008, 37) argues that these traumas create feelings of vulnerability.

Besides Amy, also Eva's (15) life shows several of the above mentioned difficulties that cause vulnerability including changing family structures, lack of support and trauma. On two separate occasions Eva told me different, contrasting stories about her family life. During a Back to Basic trip to Norway Amy (14) and Eva were sitting near the fire place talking about their families. I join the conversation by asking some questions. Eva tells me that her parents were trying to get a divorce when she was four years old but they ended up staying together. Years later her mother decided she wanted to leave her husband for real, after which her father killed her mother and then committed suicide. Eva says her father could not live with the idea of living without his wife. Coaches disclosed to me that there has been a lot of violence throughout Eva's life. A couple of weeks later I interview Eva. When asking about her family before her parents passed away she says; "... actually we were unbreakable. We were just really good friends together. And then really good, those who were always there for each other"<sup>11</sup>. Even though both these explanations of her family life seem to be opposites, there is one thing that Eva is consistent about. Both times she mentions not blaming her dad for the death of her parents. When asking her opinion on being separated from her parents and siblings Eva says; "I hardly pay attention to it. I don't think about it. I don't really have a feeling about it. I obviously do not like it but I couldn't help it and neither could they"<sup>12</sup>. Eva seems really open and practical about losing her family. However, her legal guardian and her Back to Basic coaches wonder if this is really the case or whether she is hiding her feelings. At the moment Eva lives in a so called family group home where she lives with two foster parents and nine other youngsters including her sister. Eva claims to have processed the deaths of her parents by just accepting it and she has now created her own family of friends. Besides the process of change within the family and the trauma causing social vulnerability (Alwang et al. 2001, 17; Scheper-Hughes 2008, 37), losing both parents and therefore consistent family support is a situation that causes vulnerability as well (Robinson 2005, 18).

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<sup>11</sup> Interview Eva, 23-04-2019, Appelscha

<sup>12</sup> Interview Eva, 23-04-2019, Appelscha

## **Dysfunctional coping**

Jos (19): “Thinking backwards I also see it as a chain reaction or something. Something happened in my life and that has caused quite a lot. And I think the way I live my life right now is shaped because of it. I do not know if that is a good thing or a bad thing”<sup>13</sup>. Jos’ mother died when he was four years old due to a car accident. During his interview he says that he realizes now that he still had some unprocessed mourning of his mother’s death which caused his difficult behaviour a couple of years ago. This difficult behaviour led him to a special school which he hated, which led to more behavioural issues. On top of that, he always kind of indirectly blamed his father for his mother’s death. The anger of Jos towards his father, the issues at school and the loss of his mother all lead to social vulnerability. According to Jarrett (1997, 2018) one of the possible outcomes of vulnerability is becoming a teen parent. A few years ago Jos became a parent which results in a more vulnerable situation dealing with relational and emotional issues regarding his relationship with his son and the mother of his son.

Drawing from Jos’s example the anger can be seen as externalized problem behaviour. Buehler et al. (1997, 233-4) think that, psychologically, youth in vulnerable situations are often dealing with internalized and externalized problem behaviour. Internalized issues are low self-esteem, anxiety and depression. Externalized issues can be aggression, substance abuse and delinquency. These internalized and externalized issues can be linked to the coping behaviour I have seen of several youth.

In literature there are several types of coping strategies that can be identified. As discussed in the introduction scientists usually distinguish at least two types of coping (Thoits 1995, 60). Besides these two types of coping there is also a less useful way of coping according to Carver et al. (1989, 267). The less useful, or dysfunctional, ways of coping are mental or behavioural disengagement, denial and disengagement due to alcohol and drugs (Carver et al. 1989, 268-270).

Within my research I witnessed some dysfunctional ways of coping that seemed to enhance the difficulties that youth had. When this happens a vicious cycle of vulnerability is created. This vicious cycle of vulnerability is also seen by Siegel and Alwang (1999, vi). Related to vulnerability they argue that a limited asset base leads to more difficulty in times of change. Having a difficult time means there is no opportunity to invest in assets, so there is no improvement. Eventually this means that there is a decline in tangible and intangible assets

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<sup>13</sup> Interview Jos, 03-04-2019, Dirksland



(Siegel and Alwang 1999, vi). This decline in assets seemed to be the case for youth as well. This can be seen in the example of Mitch (18) who started to do drugs, one of the less useful coping strategies. Due to his drug use school started to become more of an issue and his relationship with his parents got more complicated. This is the decline in assets that Siegel and Alwang (1999, vi) mention. Mitch distinguishes a clear starting point of his vicious cycle, and his dysfunctional coping. When his parents got divorced all of his issues regarding school, drugs and robbing started. Mitch used these externalized issues as a way of coping with his vulnerable situation growing up in an unstable, compound family in which he had to move around a lot. Also Jos distinguished his mother's death as a clear starting point of his anger, a way of dysfunctional coping, and his vulnerable situation.

There are some more ways of coping that youngsters engage in that might not be so fruitful. One of the youngsters clearly explains her own behaviour as coping behaviour. Regarding self-mutilation Ilja (16) says; "switching mental pain to physical pain. Then I can have control over it, because you can see it heal. You know what I'm saying? Then you can see it heal and then you're done with the pain. But it is not done..."<sup>14</sup>. She talks about how she has been feeling suicidal for some time. She was really depressed and even though this got better when she got a boyfriend who supports her, she still reports being suicidal. During our trip in Norway she talks about having laughed her real laugh again for the first time in a long time. Even though she was really happy to discover that she could laugh and be positive and nice to herself, this week also made her realize that she had hated herself even more than she thought. Ilja clearly describes self-mutilation to be a type of coping, to deal with her mental pain. This mental pain and depression is one of the examples of internalized problem behaviour (Buehler et al. 1997, 233-4). However, she also reports herself that she does not know why she does it because she knows it will not help her in the end. Therefore her self-mutilation can be considered as part of a vicious cycle of issues and vulnerability. Her way of coping creates more issues instead of it being a solution for the future.

Other than self-mutilation and anger also the use of drugs is a way of adapting to your life and coping with issues. I already discussed this for Mitch, but more youngsters used this way of coping. Drugs are however also seen to cause more issues than they solve which makes them part of the vicious cycle.

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<sup>14</sup> Interview Ilja, 23-04-2019, Appelscha

We are sitting in a log cabin in the mountains of Norway. I am staring out the window trying to wake up my brain from the short night I had sleeping on the couch. Next to me is a wood stove, I can hear the wood crackling when it burns. On top is a kettle to heat up water for tea. I can see a tree outside our window, if I look the other way I can see another cabin. But that's it, the rest of our surrounding is just piles and piles of snow. We have no cell service, no electricity, and no running water. This is the idea of going back to the basics. All eight youngsters, two interns, four coaches and I are sitting around two big tables, some of us on the large sofa while some are sitting on wooden chairs. In the far corner from where I am sitting I see Jesse, he is trying to disappear into his hoodie. Milan is sitting next to him trying to take responsibility for his actions by being honest. Both boys took drugs on our first night in Norway, reportedly because they were anxious of beginning the Back to Basic track. Taking drugs while being away with Back to Basic is absolutely prohibited. The whole group confesses to have known about it. For some this secret brought some tension to the group, others say that they did not give it much thought. Eva shares that she thought it was 'strijder'<sup>15</sup> that those boys took drugs with them to Norway. Eva expected the coaches to go through all the bags so she thought you'd never get away with bringing drugs. Milan says there is nothing 'strijder' about his actions. He calls it pathetic and stupid. Later when one coach asks Jeroen what he would have done he admits that if there would have been enough drugs he might have participated in taking them. He says he knows the good feeling it gives and I see some others nodding their heads. The coach understands his point of view and thanks Jeroen for his honesty. Afterwards the decision is made that Milan and Jesse will be taken away from the rest of the group for a while since they broke the rules. Later this week I overhear Milan laughingly saying that he and Jesse both barely have a nasal septum left because of all the drugs they sniffed throughout the last years, while he says this he pushes his nose flat against his face<sup>16</sup>.

The situation in Norway demonstrates how the use of drugs can be a coping strategy. In this case Milan and Jesse, and probably the other youngsters too, were scared, nervous and anxious about starting to make a change in their lives with their Back to Basic program. They covered this up by taking drugs, by not being there for a bit. It is interesting to see that these youngsters, who only knew each other for a day, did keep this secret for each other and how Eva was able to admit that she thought it was pretty cool that they took the drugs with them.

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<sup>15</sup> Strijder literally means warrior but is used as slang. It could be considered 'bad ass'.

<sup>16</sup> Trip to Norway 25-03-2019 till 31-03-2019, Evje and surroundings

From Back to Basic's viewpoint the whole track is based on trust and opening up towards each other. Apparently Eva (and perhaps the others) did not think they would be entitled to that trust. This might come from all the rules that youth have to oblige to at home or in their group homes. In the cabin in Norway we see Jesse (17) hiding from his reality. It turns out that Jesse was quite addicted to drugs which made him dependent on it. In an interview he talks about how the use of drugs made him lie to his mother and how he constantly tried to hide the drugs, his usage, and the fact that he was selling it. This behaviour then led him and his mother to argue a lot. Therefore Jesse's drugs were just as much a way to cope with his vulnerable situation as it was a way of creating vulnerability. This vicious cycle concerning drugs is something that I came across frequently.



Picture from the meeting in Norway – taken by a Back to Basic coach

This chapter touches upon several theoretical approaches to social vulnerability and to the negative sides of coping. However, it mostly aims to demonstrate how these concepts of social vulnerability and coping are seen within the lives of the youth at Back to Basic. It is seen that due to their situations at home and with their family youth are in vulnerable positions. Sometimes they try to deal with or solve these vulnerable positions with the use of anger, self-mutilations or drugs. This is a form of dysfunctional coping which results in a vicious cycle of vulnerability. The next chapter elaborates more on Back to Basic's support in

terms of empowerment, positive coping and resilience and on social support. The chapter goes more in-depth into the methods that Back to Basic uses and it provides examples of how Back to Basic works.



## Chapter 3 - Back to Basic's support

On a Tuesday morning in March Priscilla is motivated to go on her second Back to Basic trip, she packed her bags last night and she wants to go. Once the doorbell rang it became apparent that Priscilla's morning will not go as she had planned. As Priscilla describes herself the next day, she was taken from her bed by the police and taken into custody for questioning. A few weeks before, Priscilla had been fighting on the schoolyard. The girl she was fighting with decided to press charges against Priscilla for severe abuse which made her sit in a cell for a day. Due to her police visit Priscilla missed the first day of the group meeting. Motivated as she is Priscilla ends up arriving late in the evening. The next morning she is reunited with the rest of the group. We start off the day like every other day that week, by taking the manual and filling out some pages. This day we start with the theme of respect, there are nine lines with opposing statements. All youngsters rank which statement best applies to them. While discussing the statements we come across the topic of bullying. Nine out of the ten people present, including me and the coaches, has experienced bullying. Priscilla raises her hand as well, by the look on her face I can tell it touches her that others know this feeling. One of the coaches asks Priscilla if this is something that makes her show her soft side, Priscilla nods. Showing her soft side is something they have been working on in the last meeting as well. There are two final questions to the statements about respect in the manual, asking which statements the youngster relates to most and which they would like to change. Priscilla mentions wanting to get less angry, expressing herself more calmly. We finish our theme of respect and move on to the activity of the day; mountain biking. Just like me, Priscilla has never been mountain biking. We go to a bike shop where we get our bikes, some explanation on how it works and we get to practice. As we go into the woods we can also practice going up and down hills. This is something I particularly find scary, but the youngsters encourage me to push through. If they all do it, I have to do it too is their opinion. Once everyone has the techniques down we eat some lunch and start our route. All four participating youngsters have set up goals for today, including Priscilla. They want to create more focus, be more calm, gain confidence and think before they act. During our bike ride we stop sometimes to catch up with each other. It is noticeable that everyone is having fun and is focused on themselves and their bikes. When we are catching up for the second time Priscilla is sighing and saying that she is getting tired. Nevertheless we start cycling again. After another half hour we stop and check in with each other. By now Priscilla is kind of done with mountain biking, she is not enjoying it anymore and she is tired. We get on our bikes once more and continue our route. Priscilla is

a bit slower than some others so she is cycling in the back of the row, in front of me and one coach who closes the line. Priscilla stops, half crying, half angrily she says she will not keep on cycling, she wants to quit. She addressed the issue of being tired before and felt like she was not heard by the coaches. At first Priscilla states that she is not feeling well too and she keeps cursing. I give her some water from my bottle and some cookies. After having talked to her for a while one coach decides to stay with her while I and another intern continue towards the rest of the group. Since staying calm and focussed was one of Priscilla's goals the coach pushes her to deal with the situation. He takes her to one of the other coaches that she is mad at. He gives her an opportunity to express herself and tell the coach why she is mad at him and how he can fix it. This challenges Priscilla to express something she does want instead of just mentioning what she does not want. It takes Priscilla quite some time before she can express herself, at first she is just crying, angrily kicking her paddles and staring at the ground. The coaches are patient and persistent and eventually Priscilla manages to reach a goal. Later the coach Priscilla was mad at tells me he kept cycling in a really fast pace to challenge Priscilla to deal with her feelings and to express them in a healthy way. His goal for Priscilla therefore seemed to be reached. When evaluating the mountain biking experience when we get back to the bike shop Priscilla mentions that she ran into herself during the activity. She realizes that she did not express her needs clear enough for someone else to do something about them. This is the knowledge that she learned and will take with her from this activity<sup>17</sup>.

In the description above several elements of Back to Basic become clear. The way that youngsters do not get punished when something goes wrong, like when Priscilla gets put in jail. The way that the manual is used and topics are discussed showing vulnerable sides of both coaches and youngsters. On top of that the situation shows the way that the youngsters encourage each other and me. The mountain bike activity specifically demonstrates Back to Basic's way of working with experiential learning. Through doing an activity the youngsters learn something about themselves. Priscilla mentioned learning about the importance of clearly telling her needs. The other youngsters report having learned how to stay focused, and how to think before they act. This was not only their goal for the activity but they reflected upon it as well. One boy for example admitted that even though he tried to think before acting he kind of forgot to do so at the end of mountain biking when he decided to take a different

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<sup>17</sup> Trip to Friesland 05-03-2019 till 08-03-2019, Appelscha and surroundings

route than the others. This was a learning point for him for next time. Through this we see that Back to Basic tries to teach participants life skills by doing different activities, by setting goals and reflecting. Back to Basic's aim is to help youth improve their lives before their issues get too difficult to deal with. By doing this Back to Basic can be classified as a youth empowerment program.

There are several elements within this empowerment that are brought to the surface in the description of the mountain biking activity. In the following parts of this chapter I first elaborate on empowerment in general, which I then specify to positive coping and resilience as being part of empowerment. Afterwards I move towards the concept of social support that lures in the shadows of all methods of empowerment, coping and resilience. I then move onto the methods I described in the first chapter of this thesis. I elaborate on how every method is put into practice. I start with the method of experiential learning, moving to system-orientation, then to the role of coaches and finally the use of the manual.

## **Empowerment**

There is some overlap between empowerment and Back to Basic's way of working. Within empowerment there are some similarities to be seen with the way that Back to Basic works. Like discussed in the first chapter, creating knowledge of the competences that youth have is believed to be part of empowerment (Russel et al. 2009, 893). I have, for example, seen Back to Basic coaches do this on multiple occasions by using different types of 'quality cards'. These are cards with different qualities on them that you can use for several exercises. According to the coaches the cards are used so youth (and parents sometimes) can reflect on their qualities and on something that they want to work towards. They also make sure that youth can give each other quality cards of qualities they recognize in the other. By doing this youth get even more of an eye opener of which qualities they have.

Other than that, empowerment is about having control over your own life. It can also be seen as "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them." (Kabeer 2001 in Malhotra & Schuler 2005, 72). This is done in Back to Basic's programs by showing youth that they have several possibilities in terms of where they live, work or go to school. Back to Basic really listens to what the youngsters want and then try to match this with their surroundings. This is seen in Thijs' (17) situation. He moved out of his parents' house because he was under too much pressure. Nowadays he still does not want to have any contact with his parents and even



though his coach asks about this sometimes he does not pressure Thijs into getting back in touch. His parents did not allow him to make choices himself but Back to Basic gives him this opportunity by supporting him in the process of becoming independent and making choices about school and living arrangements. The same consciousness of decision making is enforced in the example of Priscilla who got the opportunity to reply like she usually does by getting mad, or to stand up for her own needs. Coaches try to show her that if she stands up for her needs she can get a positive experience besides just getting mad.

There are also small practical examples of how Back to Basic empowers youth. According to theory it empowers youth to give them opportunities to apply control and power over situations (Hilfinger Messias et al. 2005, 335). This is done by handing out the contracts to the youth, to show them that they are in charge. Youngsters were also given control during trips and meetings by giving them the possibility to decide on what groceries to buy and what to eat.

## **Positive coping**

As discussed previously there are different types of coping. In the last chapter I elaborated on negative ways of coping and how this creates a vicious cycle of vulnerability. Of course there are also other, positive, ways of coping. Within the programs of Back to Basic youth learn to cope in a positive way. This can be seen as part of the empowerment to gain more control over your own life (Russel et al. 2009, 891). There is problem-focused coping which is aimed at solving the problem or doing something to alter the source of the stress, and there is emotion-focused coping in which the goal is to reduce or manage the emotional distress that has risen due to a specific situation (Carver et al. 1989, 267). Problem-focused coping is seen as the primary way of coping when there is a possibility to build something constructive. Emotion-focused coping is mostly present when people feel like they need to endure a situation. Examples of emotion-focused coping are denial, positive reinterpretation of events, and seeking social support. Examples of problem-focused coping are activities like planning, taking direct action, seeking assistance, and forcing yourself to wait before acting (Carver et al. 1989, 267). Within Back to Basic several of these coping activities are seen. While mountain biking Priscilla was pressured to ask others for assistance with adjusting to her speed. She was pressured to take action to show her needs and she was forced to wait before getting angry like she usually does. These are all part of problem-focused coping. Participants are also encouraged to seek social support from family members or friends throughout their

program which is part of emotion-focused coping. This is done by including people in youngsters surroundings through workshops, house visits and meetings but also by letting youth point out ‘helpers’ to remind them of their goals.

## **Resilience**

Resilience is about the ability to overcome stress or adversity (Jarrett 1997, 219; Barrios 2016, 28). Overcoming these obstacles of stress is a way of gaining control over your own life, emotions and actions, which ties to empowerment. Therefore I consider resilience to be part of the empowerment with which Back to Basic tries to help youth. In the last chapter the vulnerable situations of the youth were discussed. Resilience is used to deal with this vulnerability. In his anthropological research on risk and resilience Robinson (2005, 17) found that risk and vulnerability only exist as potentials which may or may not result into difficulty, disorder or illness later in life depending on other factors. Therefore resilience and vulnerability are not mutually exclusive opposites (Robinson 2015, 17). Within anthropology resilience can be conceptualised as one’s ability to cope and survive a disaster with minimum impact or damage. Another explanation of resilience is successful adaptation in the face of adversity (Barrios 2016, 28). Since Barrios (2016, 28) mostly considers resilience in terms of disaster management considering both social and ecological systems, I will also take Jarrett’s (1997, 219) more youth-focused conceptualization of vulnerability into account. She describes resilience as an individual’s ability to positively respond to stressful situations. Alwang et al. (2001 19) agree by describing vulnerability as a threat and resilience as the ability to exploit opportunities and recover from negative shocks. Resilience can therefore be tied to coping. Some mechanisms to enhance individual coping, to increase resilience and to decrease vulnerability are identified (Jarrett 1997, 219). These are mechanisms of reducing impact of risk, reducing the likelihood of negative chain reactions associated with adversity, creating new opportunities for success and establishing and maintaining self-esteem and self-efficacy. The effectiveness of these mechanisms can be ensured by the help of parents by monitoring, supporting and creating new links to individuals and institutions (Jarrett 1997, 226). By creating new links there are new opportunities for success. Developing new social ties is part of social support and social capital that can increase levels of resilience (Sanders et al. 2015, 42).

As described above, vulnerability does not need to result into negative outcomes like violence or drug abuse if someone has the ability to overcome difficulties using resilience.

According to Sanders et al. (2015, 42) there is evidence that programs can increase resilience for youth struggling with complex needs. Ungar (2011, 1742) agrees with this by stating that early help provides individuals with the capacity to recover from adversity. However, resilience depends on people's resources like support networks (Sanders et al. 2015, 42). In anthropological sense the need for support to create resilience is seen as well (Barrios 2016, 32). If resilience is not enhanced due to family support, other support like new links to individuals or institutions should be taken into consideration.

## **Social support**

Social support is an important element of the improvement process within empowerment, coping, resilience and the decrease in vulnerability. Social support is important since it is found to promote mental and physical well-being, especially in times of stressful experiences (Jacobson 1987, 42). As mentioned before social support (Lin et al. 1979, 109) comes from different social ties which are found in people's social networks. Social support is part of social capital. Social capital is based on the idea of participation in two different types of social networks, open and closed networks. Having these different social networks from which social support is received and using these support ties is social capital. There are two types of social capital, bridging and bonding (Beugelsdijk & Smulders 2003, 1). The bonding social capital regards closed networks of family and friends, whereas the bridging social capital are more open networks that connect socially diverse groups of people (Putnam 2000 in Beugelsdijk & Smulders 2003, 2). In this research the bonding social capital with closed networks are mostly youths' family and friends. The bridging social capital with open networks are organisations like Back to Basic or other people that youth receive care from like their legal guardians. Social capital is mostly related to trust and interaction and it is often used for economic reasons (Beugelsdijk & Smulders 2003, 2-3), like using a social network to approach different job opportunities. However, social capital is not only used in professional settings. Reaching out for help to improve your life and focus on the future can also be seen as an investment in social capital according to Lin (1999, 4). This focus on personal improvement is seen within Back to Basic.

The social resources within social capital can provide people with knowledge, skills and education (Portes 1998, 4). When looking at Back to Basic's mission statement they are the ones providing youngsters and their families with knowledge, skills and education to equip them properly for the world nowadays. So following Portes' theory Back to Basic is the social

resource within social capital for the participants of Back to Basic. Participants need this because having more social capital and more social resources leads to more possibilities for ones future. On top of general social resources parental factors such as support, monitoring, and communication skills are crucial resources for youth as well (Zolkoski and Bullock 2012; 2301). Sometimes providing this support can be difficult for parents. This is something that they can get help with during a Back to Basic track. Back to Basic tries to increase parental support and empowers parents by giving workshops on, among others, nonviolent communication. In this workshop parents learn to think of their needs and how they express those towards their children. They are challenged to distinguish feelings and needs within themselves and to understand this from the point of view of their children. The help towards parents and families is mostly focused on communication but also on having fun together since Back to Basic coaches often find that it is hard for families to share having a good time. This might improve their relationships, renew their bonds and therefore provide more social support. Eventually this can lead to having more social capital. As previously addressed this social support and social capital can then result into more resilience and it can be used as a way of coping.

### **Experiential learning put to practice**

The first and most important method taken on by Back to Basic is experiential learning. The theory of experiential learning looks at learning as a process in which they create knowledge through the transformation of experience (Kolb & Kolb 2005, 194). Throughout this thesis there have been many examples of experiential learning. One of those examples is the mountain biking experience of Priscilla in the beginning of this chapter. Coaches try to gently push participants out of their comfort zone to experience something new. I have seen this happen in many occasions. For example with mothers who are encouraged to go wall climbing even though they are scared or youngsters going cross country skiing until they are completely out of energy. Rik (17) mentioned being pushed out of his comfort zone when he was left alone in a forest in Sweden for 24 hours without a phone or anyone to talk to. This solo bivouac as they call it, is done as a last challenge in every youth track. Youth are provided with equipment, skills and knowledge to survive by themselves for 24 hours. By doing this the Back to Basic coaches see how youth react to situations in which they are left with just themselves, when they do not have total control or in which they get frustrated. The coaches then try to help analyse the behaviour by inviting the youngster (or parents) to think

about the behaviour and whether this is a recurring pattern. If it is a recurring pattern they might look into the effectiveness of the pattern to see if this is something the youngster/parent wants to change. I have seen this happen with different kinds of behaviour like the use of drugs, but mostly with the use of anger or thinking patterns like staying positive, being confident and keeping calm.

Image of me climbing with a blind fold on as extra challenge. Part of experiential learning in Appelscha, Friesland – taken by a Back to Basic coach



### **System-orientation put to practice**

The second working method of Back to Basic that I described is system-orientation. With system-orientation being a circular model of everything having influence on everything a person's surrounding is taken into consideration (Jessurun 1987, 3). In their program Back to Basic uses different activities and exercises for families to work together and to uncover their patterns. This is seen in the next example of Daniël's family doing a communication exercise. This shows both experiential learning and the system-orientation approach. Since Daniël is not currently in touch with his biological father he is not here as part of Daniël's system. At the moment Daniël mostly interacts with his mother, her boyfriend and his little brother. This is why these people are important to include in the process to see how they interact and communicate and to improve this.

I stand next to Daniël (15) during the parent-child meeting of his youth track at Back to Basic. I start asking him questions while his stepfather and brother run around. Their coach gave them the assignment to build a structure with 'Lego' on one side of the field and then another person on the other side has to rebuild this structure. There are two people in the middle running back and forth to explain the person on the other side what the structure looks like. Daniël is here with his mother, his little brother and his mother's boyfriend. Since Daniël is the one that came up with the structure he now has to wait for his brother and stepfather to distribute the message. In the meantime he talks to me. His mother's boyfriend has been with his mother since he was around 8 years old. He has lived with them for as long as Daniël can remember. Therefore Daniël calls the boyfriend 'dad' and it feels like his dad as well.

By now Daniël's mother has completed the 'Lego' structure on the other side of the field. They start comparing the structures and reflect on how the activity went. Daniël's stepfather mentions that he does not like the boys talking disrespectful to their mothers. He hopes that they can stay calm a bit more. While reflecting Daniël says he designed the easiest structure so it would be easier on his parents and brother. The coach asks whether he does that at home as well. Daniël says he often tries to make it easier on the others, however, this is not something that is noticed by his family members<sup>18</sup>.

Uncovering similar patterns is the aim of these activities. Now the family can use this experience when going home to think about their ways of communicating. They also set some goals with the coach of not shouting and cursing at each other at home. Communication is seen to be a crucial resource for youth in terms of parental factors (Zolkoski and Bullock 2012; 2301). Therefore it makes sense that Back to Basic tries to improve this using a system-orientation approach within families.

### **The role of coaches**

In the first chapter also the role of coaches was explained as one of the methods of Back to Basic. When getting support from Back to Basic the coaches go above and beyond to be there for the youngsters in whatever way they can. An example of this support is seen in the situation of Joost (17). According to the Back to Basic coaches he comes from a wealthy family but he is having a hard time with the fact that his father left a couple of years ago. Joost's parents are not really sure on how to discipline him so he keeps getting in trouble while, according to the coaches, he just needs adult support.

On the first trip that I take with Back to Basic I stumble upon a challenging situation. We are meeting up at the office building in Eindhoven before leaving to Friesland for four days. Joost, refuses to go on the trip. His mother pushed him to come with her to the office, Joost comes in but makes it clear that he is not planning on participating in the trip. Joost wants to go to his grandparents whom he has not been in touch with for over six months, he feels guilty and he wants to see them. The Back to Basic coaches try to convince Joost to come with for over an hour. They use several approaches, while sitting at a big wooden table in the church where Back to Basic's office is coaches are creating a group feeling by asking the other boys

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<sup>18</sup> Parent-child meeting, 11-04-2019 till 12-04-2019, Geldrop

why they want to come and why they want Joost with them. One of the coaches takes Joost to go boxing for a bit so he can let go of his anger. Eventually they decide that it is best to leave Joost with one coach so the rest of the group does not have to deal with being dragged back and forth the whole time. One coach explains to me that they do not want to let Joost go to his grandparents because the last trip it became clear that he does need support. The coaches are trying to show Joost that some adults will support him unconditionally.

That evening Joost and the coach that was with him turn up in Friesland after all. However, the next morning Joost does not want to eat breakfast or make sandwiches for lunch since he is going home anyways. He does not want to join in on the start of the day when the others are discussing the theme of respect. Joost keeps sitting at the table all tucked away in his hoodie. The coaches try to persuade him in participating once again. Eventually we leave Joost and a coach to start our activity of the day; mountain biking. Soon Joost walks away and the coach was left calling the police to report Joost as a missing person. Later that night we hear that somehow Joost made it all the way from Friesland to Brabant by himself. He breaks into his own house to get his phone charger after which he walks away again. Since he has been home he is now back into his mothers' care. First she calls all friends and family members she can think of to tell them not to let Joost in. The coaches advise her not to do that because Joost is desperate to not be rejected for once. The mother chooses to agree with the coaches and tells her son that he can come home<sup>19</sup>.

Weeks before, when the youngsters of this group were signing their contracts with Back to Basic, Joost asked whether he could end the contract and participation in Back to Basic throughout the track himself. During this week in Friesland the coaches did not let him quit, they kept showing their support. The coaches tried this during the next weeks as well, the next time I meet Joost is on a parent-child trip that he, again, did not want to go to. He is sitting at the fire far away from the rest of the group while his mother participates in the activities. Joost was getting mad at his mother for not listening to him and not going home with him. After a while Joost walks away again knowing that his father told him not to bother coming home that night if he did not participate. To still support Joost's case the coaches invite Joost's father over the next day to talk to him about everything that is going on.

The unconditional support and understanding that Back to Basic offers is important to the coaches. Some coaches tell me once that they are not there to tell the youth off, that is what

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<sup>19</sup> Trip to Friesland, 05-03-2019 till 08-03-2019, Appelscha and surroundings

everyone around them is already doing. The coaches are there to encourage them in a positive way. In the example of Joost he does not take the support or help yet, however, for other this unconditional support helps. This was the case in another situation with Priscilla as well. She was scared to tell me and a coach what kind of terrible thing she had done. The coach started asking if she killed anyone or if she robbed a bank. When Priscilla said it was not something as bad as that the coach comforted her that in that case she would be fine telling him. Gaining her trust by doing this it made Priscilla open up to the him after all later that day. Unconditional support is part of the positive client-staff relationship. The importance of this relationship is emphasized in youth empowerment (Harder et al. 2012, 315).

Not only this unconditional support is part of the positive client-staff relationship. As mentioned before the friendly relationships with coaches are also an important element. During meetings some days the goal or approach was to relax and have fun. This is then seen as part of counselling when youth do not get to do this at home or as a reward for working hard during the meeting. Making jokes and having fun seems to affect the youngsters since they start joining in. I have witnessed several moments of youth and coaches making fun of each other like when Mitch (18) joked with his coach that he would ‘kick him in his nuts again’ when talking about his martial art<sup>20</sup>. These coaches do not just joke around but also show support through this. Rik (17) explains the bond with his previous coach; “If I called him like ‘dude I am having a shitty week’. Then he would just be like ‘what the fuck old man, just chill’ you know? He would do it in a laughing way and then I would laugh as well. I would think like I am exaggerating and such things. But he was always there. Yes, even for my mother, if something was wrong my mother could always call or text him<sup>21</sup>”.

## **The use of the manual**

The manual is the last method that Back to Basic uses that I want to explore. The manual is used on a daily basis to set and evaluate goals. This is seen in the case of Priscilla’s first morning in Friesland when discussing the theme of respect. At the start of the next chapter I provide another example of the use of the manual. Through the manual, participants are encouraged to make plans, to take direct action and, as seen in the next chapter, they are also forced to seek assistance from their immediate surroundings with reaching their goals. These

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<sup>20</sup> House visit Mitch, 13-02-2019, Tilburg

<sup>21</sup> Interview Rik, 22-03-2019, Oostkapelle



are all elements of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Carver et al. 1989, 267) which are enforced through writing it down in a manual.

The next chapter first continues on the use of the manual, then discusses the promised results and finally shows participants' experiences with Back to Basic.

## Chapter 4 – Experiencing Back to Basic

In the evening, after we recovered from mountain biking, we get the manuals out again. The youth are going to set up a plan of how to achieve their own picked goals. We are all sitting together at the table talking about what goals they want to set and how they are going to go about this. Priscilla's goal is to be more calm, to think before she does something. Someone suggests that it might help her to count to ten when she feels she is getting annoyed. Priscilla likes this idea and writes it down, she says two coaches can help remind her of this by saying the word 'kapsalon'<sup>22</sup>, to her. Priscilla also sets a time for herself, if she sticks to this for 4 weeks and it goes well she can eat a 'kapsalon' as a treat to herself. The youth encourage each other by complementing the goals they set up. The next morning we continue working with the goals which are combined with a focus on communication and working together. Today there will be a very practical sense to the communication and working together because we are doing a high ropes course with a buddy. Priscilla is working with her buddy Daniël and I join them. Daniël is quite scared to do the high ropes but Priscilla is understanding and supportive. Even after Daniël refuses to go on a higher course for the third time Priscilla stays calm. She quietly expresses her desire to go on the higher course to challenge herself in which she makes her needs apparent. The coaches want to be accommodating so they split up and help Priscilla on a higher course and Daniël on a lower one. When I join Priscilla again we are on the highest rope course which makes me anxious. Priscilla keeps encouraging and helping me. During the evaluation after the activity this is mentioned as well. Priscilla showed her soft side today, there was no cursing, no getting mad but total openness and helpfulness. When these compliments are given to Priscilla by the other youngsters, coaches and me she starts smiling, looking proud of her accomplishments<sup>23</sup>.

About a month after our trip to Friesland I meet up with Priscilla again. When talking to her she reported being positive about Back to Basic's help. Even though she only started her program in January Priscilla already saw changes in herself by the time it was April. She said she didn't get mad as easily anymore and she was still using the tool of counting to ten to achieve this<sup>24</sup>. Her positivity towards Back to Basic is seen in her determination and commitment as well. Even though her mother decided not to join the parent-child meeting, as mentioned before, Priscilla was determined to go and showed up by herself.

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<sup>22</sup> A code name to help remind her of her goal. A 'kapsalon' is a Dutch fast food dish.

<sup>23</sup> Trip to Friesland, 05-03-2019 till 08-03-2019, Appelscha and surroundings

<sup>24</sup> Parent-child weekend, 11-04-2019 till 12-04-2019, Geldrop

This last chapter is dedicated towards the experiences that youngsters and their families have with Back to Basic. I first dive into the promised results that Back to Basic posts on their website. I then move towards the experiences of the youngsters, their families and the changes that I saw myself. Since I spoke to youngsters that just started their first track, to some who were in their third track and to some who were about to finish their track, there is a variety of ways to look at Back to Basic.

## **The promised results**

On the website Back to Basic offers some expectations<sup>25</sup>. They state that their program is unique and they describe the results after participation. Back to Basic is unique because it combines active meetings and intensive coaching at home. They work with coaches from all different fields that try to really work with youngsters and their social environments. Furthermore, there is a step by step focus on developing independence for youngsters and they only offer customized tracks based on actual needs. The results of the tracks are put in numbers. According to the website and flyers 98% of all participants finish the program. 80% of all participants prevent out-of-home placements whenever this was about to happen. 95% of all participants stay in school or go back to school. Finally, participants and parents give Back to Basic an 8 out of 10 as a final grade.

When looking at the literature for effectiveness of youth care programs Sanders et al. (2015, 41) have found that here are several important elements to positive youth development programs. These include focusing on strengths and competencies, active involvement in decision making and creating positive relationships. These are all elements that can be found in the program of Back to Basic. This can be seen due to the naming of qualities, the focus on new goals and working towards them, and the relations within Back to Basic with other youth and coaches. Moreover the coaches try to help youngsters improve their relationships with their surroundings and they help youngsters see the different possibilities that they have and the choices that they can make. According to Sanders et al. (2015, 41) these types of programs can provide opportunities for young people. As mentioned before creating positive coping strategies and enhancing resilience are of great importance when dealing with vulnerability and the ability to respond positively to stressful situations (Jarrett 1997, 2019). Sanders et al. (2015, 49) have found that those who received empowering services, like I would consider Back to Basic, enhanced their resilience which resulted in better wellbeing outcomes. The

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.btobasic.nl/resultaten/> accessed on 12-06-2019

importance of the use of the whole system by using family support like suggested by Pinkerton and Dolan (2007, 219) is used by Back to Basic as well. This is done by including the parents through workshops and a parent-child meeting for youth tracks and of course this is done even more in family tracks. Family support can lead to coping due to the use of social capital and increase in resilience, according to Pinkerton and Dolan (2007, 226). This combination of elements is seen in Back to Basic throughout this research. However, these are all expected results, to get more of an image of how youth and their families experience this I talked to them about it.

### **The experiences of participants**

For Priscilla her youth track at Back to Basic seems to be a positive experience and change. To see if Back to Basic's work is effective and supporting the participants I look at several participants' perspectives. Most of them are positive. Aaron (25) is nearing the end of his track and genuinely says he has changed because of it. He got some great tools to plan more and to take more time to do activities he enjoys. Erik (23) has done several individual tracks at Back to Basic. He is optimistic about how it helped him; "I have progressed and got out of some sort of downwards spiral."<sup>26</sup> He explains quitting drugs and getting back into school since the start of his Back to Basic journey. Mitch (18) is also positive when looking back at the youth track he did before his current individual track. "Amazing" "Amazing, okay, why?" "Yes, we went to Norway, to Germany, France, yes that was fun. Or fun, it was really informative"<sup>27</sup>. Mitch talks about how he learned not to exaggerate and to choose his own path, to be himself. Even though Mitch felt like his youth track was informative it did not give him sufficient support. Afterwards he and his mother felt like he was not there yet, therefore he started a family track and eventually an individual track. Mitch and his mother discuss how some people expect Mitch to change straight away after having been in a Back to Basic track for a couple of weeks. However, they both feel like a longer period of help is better for Mitch. Nowadays he gets house visits every week which help him a lot. He gets to discuss his struggles with his coach who has known him for a long time and who knows how to confront him. Looking back both Mitch and his mother think the periods of time between the tracks in which they had to wait for funding were really difficult. Without any support it was difficult

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<sup>26</sup> Interview Erik, 20-02-2019, Eindhoven

<sup>27</sup> Interview Mitch, 21-02-2019, Tilburg

to maintain the change that was made before. Whenever Back to Basic helps Mitch with this, he is able to cope. However, he is not yet able to do this by himself.

When I spoke to Aaron (25) he was nearing the end of his individual track at Back to Basic. He was really positive about the support that he got. I asked him what specific things his coach had taught him and he replied; “Setting goals. Small goals, small steps. And in that way you can work towards something more and [I learned] how to take my moments of rest. That I have to take them too. That it is good to take it easy. Just stand still, take a breath and start doing things”<sup>28</sup>. These are specific tools that are handed to Aaron so he can start the process of coping himself. His coach also encourages Aaron to pick up new hobby’s or sports. Due to the support Aaron increases his resilience, his adaptation in times of adversity becomes more successful as Barrios (2016, 28) puts it.

Jesse (17) also reports a massive change in his life since Back to Basic. He stopped doing drugs and is more open and honest with his parents. He mostly came to the conclusion that change was necessary after doing drugs in Norway and getting separated from the rest. On this day apart he had to walk for hours and hours, he was not allowed to talk to the other youngster Milan or the coaches. They all walked silently in a row. Jesse was mentally and physically exhausted at the end of the day. Since he could not talk to anyone he was left there with the struggle of his own thoughts, which he needed to write down later. He remembers that to be a changing moment for his development. This changing moment is a clear cut example of how Back to Basic uses experiential learning. In this case creating the knowledge that there is a need for change in Jesse’s own behaviour was done through the process of experience. This manner of creating new knowledge through the transformation of experience from which you can learn for the future is what experiential learning stands for (Kolb and Kolb 2005, 194).

Family members report getting quite some insights due to Back to Basic’s activities. An example of this is the importance of communication that becomes apparent when working with blind folds. One mother specifically notices how her son needs a different way of communication to get a message across then she uses with her older daughters. By doing these activities with communication and blind folds Back to Basic tries to uncover what is going well and which difficulties there are. They then take these examples back to the home sphere by asking questions like; are the participants acting the same in the game as they do at home? This especially helps families see their own patterns. When seeing these patterns the

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<sup>28</sup> Interview Aaron, 12-03-2019, Utrecht

help of Back to Basic can also be confronting to participants. This is not always something that they want in the moment, but it might be helpful to them in the end. Coaches do this for both youth and families. They try to see through certain coping mechanisms that are in place. Amy (14), Eva (15) and Ilja (15) for example were confronted with their regular way of responding, getting mad or making a lot of noise, and were challenged to use something else instead.

While being with Back to Basic I have seen youth change too. This change was especially visible during our trip to Norway. At the beginning of the week Amy (14) was fairly quiet, her face was always grumpy and most of the times if she spoke it was to offend someone or to curse. Without paying much attention to all the cursing going on, the coaches came to know that Amy loves McDonalds. The coaches challenged Amy to not curse using the word ‘cancer’ anymore, if she accomplished this we would all go to McDonalds at the end of the week. This challenge helped Amy to become more aware of her use of curse words and how often she used them. It was evident that Amy was trying her best to stop cursing to complete the challenge. Other than that, the coaches and I saw a huge change of her opening up in the group. After three days she just starts talking about the group home she lives in and how her family life was when she was little without anyone asking about it. She makes jokes and laughs more, she lets herself have fun. When the end of the week is nearing this open and fun Amy is already declining. When I see her the first day of the next Back to Basic trip Amy is mostly closed again. When I ask her to do an interview she does not answer at first and only looks at me angrily, then she says no. Later, when I ask again she asks what the interview is about. I say it is about topics like her experience with Back to Basic and her home life. She states that both are ‘kut<sup>29</sup>’ and she walks away. Amy seems to have lost her openness again during her time at home. Since Amy opens up during a trip with coaches and other youngsters around it looks like the positive client-staff relationship that is emphasized to be of importance according to Harder et al. (2012, 315) is working well for her. On top of that it might help Amy to have like-minded peers who struggle with similar issues since she started opening up more and more in conversations towards them as well. This can also be seen as a form of social support.

Even though most are really positive there are some youngsters who do not take this optimistic view. Eva (15) said “... it is better if they help someone who needs it, because I do not need it”<sup>30</sup>. Max (15) expressed his scepticism towards care providers. He said he always

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<sup>29</sup> Both suck, or are shitty

<sup>30</sup> Interview Eva, 23-04-2019, Appelscha

knew their games of trying to put him in a box so he would just manipulate them. However, Max did say he liked Back to Basic's approach better by going on a weekend instead of an hour of sitting and talking which he normally does with youth or social workers. There are more youngsters who report enjoying the different approach Back to Basic has more. It looks like messages come through more once people have experienced it. Nevertheless, when asking youth who supports them only two mention their Back to Basic coaches. One youngster says participating in sports is a great support. Most youngsters answer they get support from their family and friends even though they say they usually keep to themselves whenever issues arise. On top of that the majority of the youngsters did not wish to get more support than the family or friends' support that they receive. This seems remarkable whenever they are enrolled in a youth empowerment program.

To conclude participants' experiences of Back to Basic, I see that aims of changing negative behavioural patterns are met. For example the cursing of Amy. However, I cannot state whether these are permanent changes. Falling back into old patterns when coaches are not around is something that Mitch dealt with. In the case of Aaron, he explicitly mentioned useful tools that Back to Basic provided for him. These tools allow him to be more independent and focused on his future. Therefore he seems to be more in control of his life showing the effectiveness of empowerment. When considering concepts of positive coping and enhancing resilience to deal with stressful situations more successfully I want to mention Jesse's case. The first time I meet him he uses a lot of drugs, later on the program helped him to see other solutions. Nowadays he communicates more with his support network like his family which increases resilience and can be seen as a positive coping strategy.

## Conclusion

In this concluding chapter I wish to provide a more general overview and insight into my findings. I intend to answer my main question and re-examine some theory combining this with empirical, ethnographic data.

The aim of this research is to demonstrate how social support, empowerment, resilience, coping and vulnerability are all found to be tied together in the lives of the participants of Back to Basic. To demonstrate this line of thought I run through my research one last time.

I begin where every Back to Basic journey starts, with examining the requests for help. All youngsters came to Back to Basic due to the advice of another person. They entered in one of the three tracks. Most of them wanted to improve behavioural issues like aggression or issues at home or school. The majority wanted to better their relationships and communication. The idea of Back to Basic is to intervene in the lives of youth before issues get too big to deal with. They do this through the empowerment of youth. Using an experiential learning approach they make sure that youth learn new skills. All youngsters included in this research come from separated or divorced families. This changing family structure, the lack of social capital, having an unstable family and other issues like domestic violence result into social vulnerability for the youngsters (Moser 1998, 3; Scheper-Hughes 2008, 37; Alwang et al. 2001, 18). Internalized and externalized problem behaviour are then used as a way of dysfunctional coping, creating a vicious cycle of social vulnerability (Carver et al. 1989, 268-270; Siegel and Alwang 1999, vi). These are ways of coping like the use of anger, drugs or self-mutilation, which create more problems than they solve.

There are some possibilities to decrease social vulnerability. This can be done by enhancing coping and increasing resilience. This can be done through creating new opportunities for success, establishing more self-esteem and by developing new social links (Jarrett 1997, 219). Learning coping skills to deal with your life and to be yourself are part of empowerment (Thoits 1995, 60). Back to Basic is one of those empowering organizations which focuses on increasing resilience and coping. As mentioned in the asset approach; to deal with vulnerability, to have resilience and to be able to cope, one should have intangible assets like social capital (Moser 1998, 3). Using social capital from open and closed networks and having social support in general is at the heart of all the concepts of this research. Through social support empowerment is enforced. Through creating new links and having social support, coping is enhanced. Through those new links there are more ways to success,



making social support part of resilience. Finally, social support is a huge element in social vulnerability. This element is seen because social vulnerability is found in the collective, but also because the asset of social capital can diminish social vulnerability. Because of the importance of the presence of social support the central question to this research comes naturally: “How does Back to Basic provide social support for youth in vulnerable positions coming from divorced families?” In the description of the importance of social support I already answered the ‘why’ Back to Basic uses social support, however, I also intend to answer the ‘how’.

Throughout this thesis my aim has been to show the several working methods that Back to Basic uses, how they put this to practice and how that connects to theoretical approaches. The working methods are the ‘how’ to how Back to Basic provides social support. The most important method of Back to Basic is experiential learning. In the scope of this thesis I shed light on many occasions where experiential learning was put to practice. Some examples are mountain biking or creating a ‘Lego’ structure. Through the ‘Lego’ structure I also show another important method, the system-orientation. Using the social environments of the youth Back to Basic focuses on improving communication between different parties. This is enforced by having positive client-staff relationships in which both youth and parents feel comfortable with reaching out to coaches for help. Having fun, joking around and giving youth more control over decisions is also part of the role of the coaches to empower participants. The last method I discuss is the manual in which goals are set and manners to reach those goals are written down and evaluated. Through the active involvement of the system Back to Basic hopes to create a fort of social support that is lasting even when the track ends. I try to critically look at the effectiveness of this method by asking participants how they experience Back to Basic. Most participants are positive, youth mention having learned tricks or tools and having changed. A great example of this is in the title quote of Erik (23) who developed new positive manners as he “...got out of some sort of downwards spiral.”<sup>31</sup> Parents mention having more insights into their children’s lives and ways of communication due to Back to Basic. However, there are several youngsters and families that feel like one track is not enough. One boy has already done three tracks while another youngsters’ mother feels like her son will need more help after this while they are only halfway through the first track. Falling back into old patterns is probably easy whenever you are not confronted with change every day. This falling back lines up with the vicious cycle of

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<sup>31</sup> Interview Erik, 20-02-2019, Eindhoven

social vulnerability due to dysfunctional coping as seen in this research. Perhaps this insight, and the importance of social support, can help with finding new ways to go against this way of falling back.

There are some limitations to this thesis. Since I did not research the differences between participating youth from divorced and non-divorced families I cannot state if the divorce caused anything in their lives. I can only take information from what the youngsters told me about their families changing. The same goes for what would have happened to the youngsters in vulnerable situations if they did not participate in Back to Basic. I can never state with absolute certainty if the changes seen came from participation in the program or from other changing conditions.

Even though this thesis has its limitations it seems to have relevance to several parties. It gives anthropology insights into youth care, it helps youth care with “the natives point of view” from anthropology (Malinowski 1961 in Bluebond-Langer and Korbin 2007, 245) and it might help Back to Basic with some new insights into their program. Within anthropology there has not been much study on youth, especially not on youth in issues of social vulnerability. The anthropological studies on social vulnerability providing examples of this phenomenon are scarce in general which is why this thesis fills that gap. On the other side anthropology is a benefit to the study of youth care because whenever coaches know what youth really want they can help them in the best way possible. Of course coaches already looked into the needs of youth throughout the program of Back to Basic but analysing these needs using an anthropological approach might reveal new insights. Especially social support being central to so many approaches theoretically and practically, can help coaches in their work. The program could improve, having a more sustainable result, if there was an even bigger focus on the social support within the youngsters’ own social environment. This is done nowadays by including family members. However, many youth still report not asking for help from their support network. This could be encouraged more in the program. On top of that some coaches promote finding new hobby’s as a way of support in individual tracks. It might be an idea to extend this to all tracks since this can provide more of a basis in the lives of the youth in vulnerable situations. By having youth create a more stable environment in terms of social support and by equipping youth with coping skills and enhancing their resilience, the effects of a youth empowerment program could be lasting longer.

Other than the centrality of social support in improving the lives of youth in vulnerable situations the discovery of the vicious cycles of vulnerability surprised me the most. At first I

approached my research thinking that there were issues that youth dealt with that resulted into difficult situations. However, soon after the start of this research I discovered that there was no one-way traffic between difficult situations and behaviour. Of course, looking back this makes sense and there is never a linear relationship. Nevertheless, it interests me to see how there is such a clear matter of social vulnerability seen due to dysfunctional coping. Especially since some youth already mention themselves that they know that their behaviour does not help them. Luckily there are programs like Back to Basic who seem to be able to help youth to create more constructive ways of coping to get themselves to where they want to be in live.

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