



Balancing positive engagement and transparent risk analysis with volatile youth: Introducing the Tightrope Tool

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Abstract

This paper presents a tool that encourages the engagement of the young person in the analysis of their risks, strengths and needs and in the planning of actions based on a balanced and transparent holistic assessment. It will introduce the analogy of the Tightrope, outline how it fits with current assessment frameworks to support an integrated approach and considers the role of the practitioner to apply a person-centred, strength-based approach with the tool. This paper will outline why an integrated and interactive holistic tool for volatile youth would be of benefit to both young people and professionals from various disciplines and concludes with an invitation to experienced practitioners to trial the tool in wider practice.

Introduction

Approaching adolescence can be a time of imbalance and taking risks while becoming independent from adults and growing into adulthood. It can be a time of testing limits, experimenting with new responsibilities, working out friendships, making the most of opportunities, building an identity, learning and having fun.

Sometimes young people get involved in worrying behaviour: misuse of drugs or alcohol, breaking the law, and harming others or themselves. An array of research has looked at why young people get involved in ‘risky’ behaviour, the pathways or causal factors as well as the circumstances that mean young people are more likely to persist or continue to take risks (West, 1982; Tremblay et al., 1994; Graham and Bowling, 1995; Rutter et al., 1998; Hawton et al., 2002; Sampson and Laub, 2003; Coleman and Cater, 2005; Thornberry, 2005; Brophy, 2006; Webster et al., 2006; Farrington, 2007; McLean et al., 2008 and McLean and Beak, 2012).

Young people presenting to services are often assessed in regard to their risk or vulnerability but this paper proposes a more holistic approach with reference to the term volatility and a focus on adolescent development. The term volatility can have both negative and positive connotations as do many factors of adolescent development. A thesaurus search of ‘volatile’ will bring up terms such as ‘unpredictability’, ‘rapid change’, ‘turbulent’, ‘explosive’ and ‘tense’ as well as terms such as ‘capricious’, ‘whimsical’ and ‘sprightly’. As argued by Pitts (2003), professionals and policy writers would do well to see offending as a normal part of growing up, requiring a focus on all the factors (personal, family economic, social, cultural and administrative) that influence a ‘criminal career’.

Professionals and researchers are increasingly focusing on what strengths young people have (within them and around them) to help them stay safe, avoid getting into trouble, move on and reach their potential in their journey to adulthood. Although many studies appear to have focused on specific separate behaviours, such as offending, substance misuse, self-harm, sexually problematic behaviour or violence, the research and guidance that looks at why these volatile behaviours may present with different young people often refer to similar ‘factors’, whether in regard to the pathways into the behaviour or the protective and supportive elements. Therefore, this paper argues for the use of a single holistic assessment framework that spans health, social care and criminal justice. It introduces an analogy-based interactive tool for engaging young people in the analysis of their assessment. It supports the active involvement of the young person in both the assessment and the planning process. The introduction of this tool seems a timely response to the recommendations recently published by Hanson and Holmes (2014) in their discussion about ‘the difficult age’ of adolescence and how practitioners and services respond to adolescents ‘at risk’.

The tool has been titled ‘the Tightrope’, and uses an analogy of someone walking along a tightrope high above the ground to represent the transition stage of adolescence. The Tightrope allows the worker and young person (and parents/carers) to build a picture of a

young person's risks and strengths and also consider the steps needed for the young person to move on safely.

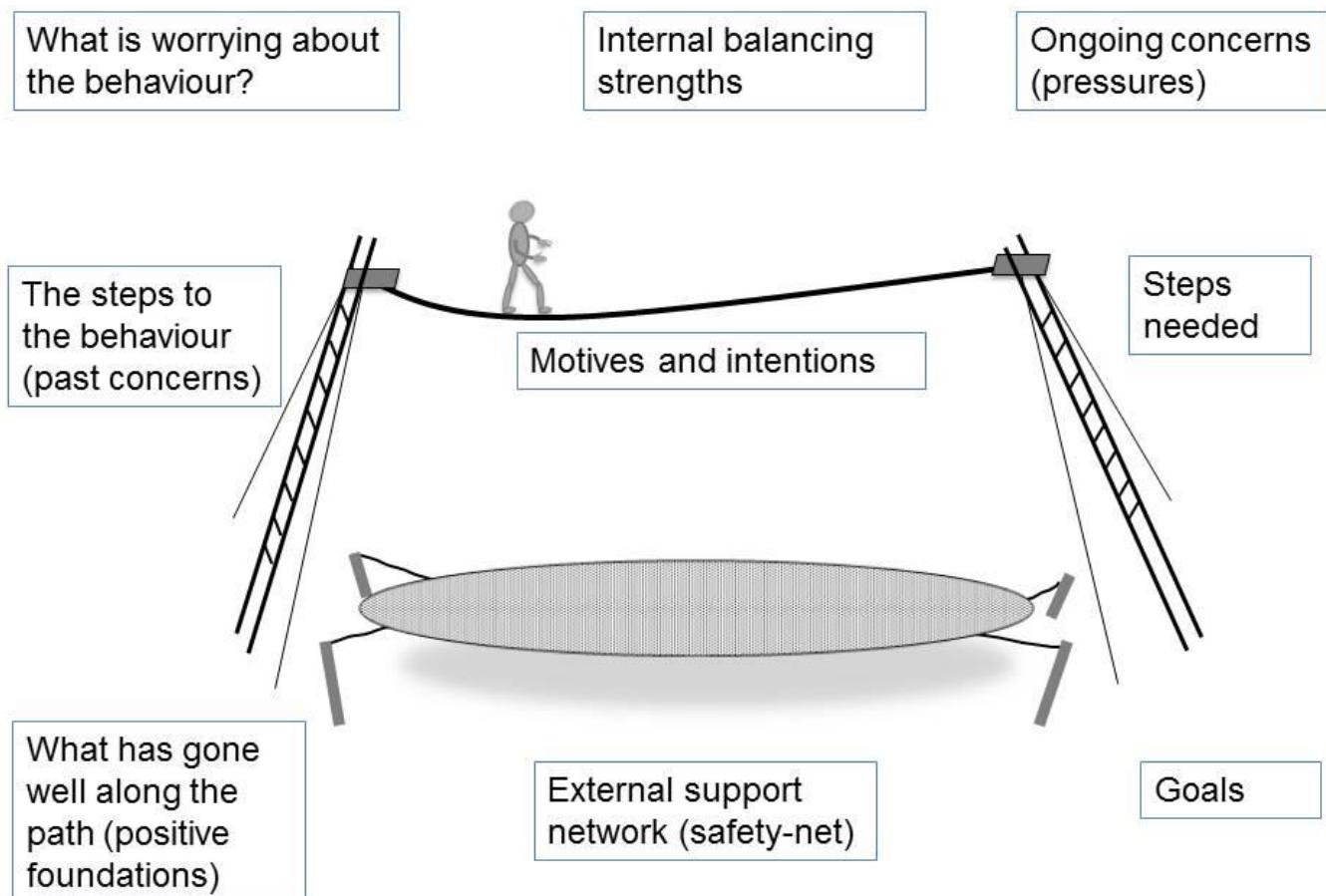
The tool incorporates eight areas for discussion. These mirror many aspects of current assessment frameworks available to professionals. The unique aspect is the use of the analogy as a visual aid for discussing an assessment, allowing an analysis of both risks and strengths that include both historical information and a future-thinking planning focus. It is hoped that the tool will be utilised by professionals in a variety of interactive ways to engage young people and also colleagues in discussions and use this as a way to work with teenagers across a number of services. This is particularly important for volatile young people who can present to a number of services simultaneously and be faced with questions and forms and reports by various professionals often asking and seeking the same information. Feedback from practitioners using the Tightrope tool in initial pilots (during late 2013) has shown that the tool has been applied successfully when working with young people presenting with a range of behaviours or concerns and at different 'thresholds' or stages of assessment and intervention.

The Tightrope analogy

The analogy was first used in 2006 as an assessment aid when working with parents who had children involved in offending. The idea of seeing the young person as someone walking on a tightrope and the parent acting as a safety net encouraged a discussion about a number of assessment areas (see Figure 1):

1. What is worrying about the behaviour
2. The past concerns leading up to the behaviour
3. Establishing what has gone well along the path to the tightrope
4. The motives and intentions of the young person (where are they on the rope)
5. The internal strengths they have to stay balanced
6. The external support network to help keep them safe and encourage them
7. What might be some ongoing concerns or pressures
8. What needs to happen next for them to move on and 'step down' to safe ground

Figure 1: The Tightrope tool as an Assessment aid



In 2012 the analogy was developed further (following feedback from workers attending training on an integrated planning approach in youth justice), into a toolkit supported by a series of symbolised prompt cards for the eight areas to be discussed. The prompts have statements based on studies and theories on adolescent development, resilience, desistence, social capital, risk and safety. As an example, within the area of past concerns the prompts are oblong shaped to represent steps up the ladder and have statements such as 'friends did the same', 'hurt by others', 'lived in poor area'. The prompts for external support are diamond shaped to represent pieces of a safety net and have statements such as 'good role model', 'positive activities', 'people who love me no matter what'. The internal strengths are on narrow shaped cards to represent the trapeze artist's balancing beam and have statements about positive personal attributes or skills such as 'caring', 'can see good in bad situation', 'can respect self'. The prompt cards for current concerns have a picture of a wind-sock to represent pressures or factors that may blow the person off course and include statements such as 'my strong emotions', 'easy to get drugs', 'loyal to others'. Each area has approximately 20 prompt cards and each prompt card is numbered. The statements are replicated in the manual that accompanies the toolkit, which outlines the research or guidance that supports the use of that statement. An example is provided later in this paper.

Primarily, the prompts are designed to act as an aid for engaging young people in discussions and to help outline the different aspects of the worker's assessment that inform interventions or plans. The prompts can support a process of self-assessment whereby the young person can quietly look through a set of cards and choose which statements they think are personally relevant or not. Workers can also indicate statements that they consider pertinent, thereby opening a dialogue about risk, safety and needs, supported by a research informed framework.

What does 'volatile youth' mean?

The Tightrope analogy can be used as a single tool and applied in a number of settings, especially when working with young people embarking on a new transition (moving home, leaving care, moving school or programme). This is when support is crucial for young people (Bartley, 2006). The prompts however have been specifically designed for use with young people involved in or at risk of:

- offending, and/or
- substance misuse, and/or
- self-harm.

These fields seem to overlap and the frameworks for assessing these behaviours all consider the presence of the other behaviours in their assessments. For example, the Youth Justice Board's (YJB) framework assesses the young person's likelihood of reoffending, risk of causing serious harm to others and their vulnerability to harm from others or their own actions (YJB, 2008). In May 2014, the Youth Justice Board released 'change tools' to support the implementation of AssetPlus. These include screening for mental health concerns and alcohol misuse.

The manual for the structured assessment of violence risk in youth (SAVRY) developed by Borum, Bartel and Forth (2000) has a coding system for assessing the risk and protective factors in relation to youth violence. These codes include offending history, self-harm and substance use difficulties as factors for risk of future violence. Berelowitz et al. (2013) produced a report on child sexual exploitation in groups and gangs. The report includes an appendix of indicators that a young person is at risk of, or is likely to have been a victim of, sexual exploitation (2013: 108), which include: involvement in offending, self-harm and thoughts of or attempts at suicide and drug or alcohol misuse. A factsheet by Alcohol Concern (2011) states that 'risky alcohol use often presents as one of a cluster of risks'. NICE public health guidance (2007) is aimed at reducing substance misuse among vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people. The groups identified as being at particular risk include young people who offend (including those who are incarcerated), those identified with mental health problems and those who are already misusing substances.

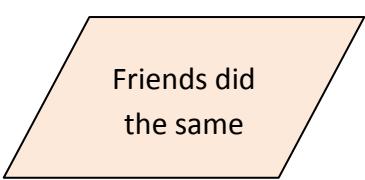
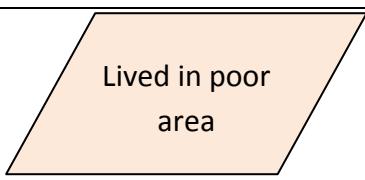
When looking at the pathways to these behaviours the research in regard to these specialist areas outline very similar factors, whether for self-harm (Royal College of

Psychiatrists, 2010: 135), offending (Farrington, 2007) or substance misuse (Alcohol Concern's Factsheet, 2011). The Tightrope tool and prompts therefore allow for a single holistic assessment to explore the pathways, risks, protective factors and strengths that are relevant across a range of specialist services. This approach supports one of the recommendations presented by the *Research in Practice* paper by Hanson and Holmes (2014), encouraging a move away from labelling young people in regard to one 'risk'.

Balancing act

Onset is not destiny. Thornberry (2005) supports this argument in regard to persistent youth offending and Hawton and Harris (2008) highlight that onset of self-harm does not mean risk of suicide. The Health Advisory Service (2001) reiterates that 'one-off and experimental use of drugs and alcohol cannot in itself be seen as indicative of having caused actual harm or being related to any personal disorder'. Vlugter states that there are 'notable differences in personal, family or social needs among those young people that have high levels of offending compared to those with low levels of offending' (2009: 117). Across all the specialist areas the message is that no single factor predicts future behaviour and the compounding of 'risk factors' increases the probability for self-harm (SCIE, 2005), problems with alcohol and/or drugs (National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse [NTA], 2007; Alcohol Concern, 2011) or offending (West, 1982; Farrington, 2007). As mentioned above, the Tightrope prompts for past concerns are oblong shaped and can be built up like a ladder to visually display their compounding nature and therefore indicate the potential level of volatility. An example of the research references provided in the toolkit is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Linking the 'Step Up' prompts to research and guidance

 Friends did the same	Thornberry (2005); Sharp et al. (2006); Armstrong et al. (2005) – close link to offending. NSPCC (2013) – sexually harmful behaviour. Brophy (2006); Kidger et al. (2012) – males may be curious if friends doing it. Hawton et al. (2002) – identify as risk of self-harm for both. Berelowitz et al. (2013) – if friends being sexually exploited then indicator of risk of sexual exploitation. Alcohol Concern (2011) – friendship with deviant peers link to substance misuse. Coleman and Cater (2005) – girls in particular may use alcohol if they feel socially pressured.
 Hurt by others	Farrington (2007) – past abuse linked to future offending. Social Exclusion Unit (2001) – poor experience of care linked to offending. Brophy (2006) – experience of abuse linked to self-harm. NSPCC (2013) – history of abuse can contribute to a child displaying harmful sexual behavior. Borum, Bartel and Forth (2000) – youth violence risk if young person experienced injuries from abuse. Berelowitz et al. (2013) – history of abuse is an indicator of risk of sexual exploitation (also living in residential care).
 Lived in poor area	Webster et al. (2006); Armstrong (2004); Thornberry et al. (2003); McCord et al. (2001) – neighbourhood deprivation linked to offending. McLean et al. (2008); Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2010 – link to self-harm; Alcohol Concern (2011) – link to substance misuse.

Bartley (2006) notes that 'early adversity does not necessarily lead to maladjustment' and supports a focus on building resilience, the ability to overcome adversity and to 'beat the odds'. McLean et al. (2008) note that a lack of resilience factors (things that can maintain balance or provide protection) is a better predictor of suicidal behaviour than the amount of exposure to stressful life events. Glover (2009) encourages assessing for resilience and looking for: secure attachments, self-esteem and self-efficacy. As outlined above, the Tightrope prompts include a set of cards with statements relating to internal balancing strengths and current support network (safety net). There is also a set for positive past experiences (foundations) that mean the Tightrope is less 'wobbly'. These include statements such as 'good memories', 'something proud of', 'something praised for'. Practitioners who used the Tightrope reported that many young people are eager to point out their strengths and also seem to identify them quicker than many professionals since 'we are sometimes too focused on risk'. The Tightrope has also encouraged workers to have a balanced approach to an assessment.

It is also important to consider the frequency and timeframes of factors (Borum et al., 2000; NTA, 2007; Kidger et al., 2012). One of the sets of prompts supports a discussion about what might make behaviour more serious or worrying and some of these consider frequency and timeframes. They are represented with a triangle filled with a question mark and exclamation mark. They include statements such as 'did something similar recently', 'involved weapons', 'first time was before 14 years'. Anecdotally, practitioners who piloted the Tightrope reported that the prompts helped them introduce some of the negative aspects of a risk assessment without prejudice. One worker spoke about a young person saying that they 'hate' people always asking about their drug use but then recognised that every young person is probably asked these questions because they are on the cards.

McNeill (2009) promotes the 'Good Lives Model' of Ward and Maruna (2007) as something that might 'work' with people who offend. This model outlines an approach of tapping in to the person's values and clarifying which of life's 'goods' their behaviour was trying to achieve as a means of identifying pathways out of offending that are pro-social but also relevant and more likely to achieve buy-in to the intervention. The Tightrope includes a set of prompt cards that are drawn from this model and other resilience research. They are represented with a picture of a heart with statements to explore values and motives, such as 'doing well at something', 'respect from others' and 'having fun'. When using the Tightrope as a training tool for mapping an assessment, this section has resonated with many practitioners as a means of refocusing and digging beneath the behaviour in order to understand drivers and triggers as well as opportunities for tapping into desires and motivation. This has proven particularly helpful for workers when used alongside research on emotional development and how certain behaviours may indicate or signal unmet emotional need.

Britton and Noor (2006) state that 'an assessment must include problems, strengths, and identification of goals and personal plans as a first step' (p8). The Youth Justice Board's new assessment framework 'AssetPlus' was launched in 2013 and has 'more emphasis on strengths and on factors which support/hinder desistance from offending' (YJB, 2013). It is important to understand that the factors that lead to the behaviour are not the same as those that will influence desistance (Graham and Bowling, 1995). Furthermore, in regard to offending, it is a normal part of adolescence (Pitts 2003) and most young people grow out of crime (Sampson and Laub, 2003; Goldson, 1997).

Muncie (2001) promotes a system that supports 'basic principles of respect, protection, informalism and rights'. The Tightrope aims to empower the young person with assessment prompts congruent to what professionals use, to build a picture of the assessment and encourage a balanced view of the cumulated risks, the breadth of protective factors and tap into the young person's strengths and values to achieve mutually agreed goals based on a discussion around what safe ground or a positive future down from the Tightrope (and away from service involvement) might look like. The toolkit includes prompts for the steps down based on studies on well-being, desistence and positive adolescent development, such as 'learn to deal with stress', 'avoid certain people', 'attend school / college or a course'. As one worker reported, the Tightrope helps to cover all the areas of the assessment and break down the steps needed to achieve the goals.

Diversity considerations

The Tightrope is designed to be an engaging and transparent approach to discussing risk assessments for young people. Ideally it would apply to those aged between 14 and 18 years old, certainly no younger than twelve years old. This is primarily due to the analogy depicting the young person as separate from their support networks, in a stage of transition and embarking on independence. If a younger child was presenting to a service due to their 'risky' behaviour then the analogy would still be a useful tool for thinking about their volatility but their parent/carer should be included in the discussion.

The Tightrope has a holistic approach to discussing a range of volatile situations, and this means it is suitable for both boys and girls, particularly as there appears to be a 4:1 ratio for the number of boys that offend compared to girls and the same ratio for the number of girls that self-harm compared to boys.

The visual analogy and the prompt cards may also support a dialogue with young people who find other question-based or form-filling assessments difficult to navigate. The analogy may initially require some explanation but the use of drawing, roleplay and videos to outline the balancing act of walking on a tightrope can overcome this. Workers who have used the tool report that the prompt cards help to engage young people who do not like a lot of questions. Some young people have found the number of prompts too overwhelming and prefer to either talk through the areas of the picture or need time to look at one or two areas at a time over a series of sessions. This has then supported a programme of intervention, which engages the young person in fully understanding their

assessment and plan. As one worker reported, it is interesting to see what the young person chooses for their risks or strengths; another said it helps with 'buy in' to the plan.

Role of the practitioner

Barlow et al. (2012) highlight the importance of achieving a balance between tools that offer scores or coding to support risk assessments or decision making and those that augment the intuitive based process of professional judgement, as championed by Munro (2011). The National Treatment Agency (2007) states that closed questions on forms may help with measuring severity of concern, however they and others (Barlow et al., 2012) support the use of descriptive assessment to validate the measurements and professional judgements.

Often a conversation with a young person will elicit more information ... than a formal form filling exercise

Britton and Noor (2006: 9)

The Tightrope does not ask for scores or coding, but during the discussion with the young person or parent/carer, the prominence of different factors can be visually understood by placing some closer or further away. If the factors are drawn on paper then their size can change according to their strength or prevalence. Using the number of steps to show the height of the ladder can give an indication of how volatile a situation is. The prompts around 'worrying behaviour' consider frequency, timeframes and severity of behaviour so as to start making judgements regarding the seriousness of concern and the type of behaviour that may continue to occur. This could elicit a discussion about what 'falling off' the rope could look like before moving on to discussing what 'safe ground' looks like and the steps needed to achieve this. There are a number of talking therapies and interviewing techniques available to professionals working with volatile young people. The Tightrope could be seen to fit with the Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, Solution Focused Brief Therapy and Motivational Interviewing approaches.

Young people are in a process of development and change. Their circumstances and how they interpret them can change rapidly. McLean et al. note that 'risk can change with circumstance, what is a risk or protective factor for one person may not be the same for another in similar circumstances' (2008: 10). Furthermore, social capital is unstable and can change over time (Furstenberg and Hughes, 1995). The Tightrope allows for the picture to be re-assessed and adjusted as situations change. Using the length of the rope as a scale to mark how far someone is from their past behaviour or how close they are to their goals can help gauge how likely the steps needed to achieve the goals can or will be taken. This can be repeated at a later stage and used as a review for progress. The use of scales is identified as an effective tool for mapping assessments and plans in a way that is helpful for both workers and the families they work with (Barlow et al., 2012). Discussions with social work colleagues who use the Signs of Safety model (Turnell, 2012) have identified the Tightrope as a transferable working tool for discussing a child

protection assessment and plan with an adolescent. The Signs of Safety model uses scaling to judge whether the identified dangers are still inevitable or whether a level of safety has been achieved in order to close the case. Similarly, scaling is used to assess willingness to change. Seeing the line of the tightrope as a measurement tool would also support the key task of assessing capacity for change.

McNeill (2009) describes the practitioner as having a crucial role in building capacity for change, along with developing or deploying motivation and opportunities for change. He uses an analogy of weaving these functions like three strands of a rope, which the practitioner would use to pull the person through change. Applied to the Tightrope analogy, the rope is not used to pull but to aid balance. The practitioner has the challenge of weaving the strands with the right amount of tension to support the person towards those first steps of change. In the Tightrope analogy the practitioner would also be part of the rope in the safety net. The prompts include external protective factors that promote resilience (people that can be trusted or who expect good of them), social capital (people who can help or someone to talk to) as well as safety or supervision (being monitored). The Hardiker model (see Department of Health et al., 2000) identifies one of the roles of the state as a 'safety net' but notes that this is a 'last resort'. Those in the role of Corporate Parent still need to ensure that they are providing a safety net that supports the young person in their development, increases their resilience (self-esteem, efficacy and attachment) and which is not too tight, or too loose. Transactional Analysis is another approach that could be linked to the analogy of the safety net, allowing consideration of the unhelpful extreme ends of 'critical' or 'marshmallow' parenting in response to childlike behaviour, and contrasting these with the balanced approach of authoritative parenting, which can still have an influential role during the 'difficult age' of adolescence (Hanson and Holmes, 2014).

It is important that young people and their parents/carers feel engaged in the process in order to secure participation and achieve desired outcomes (YJB, 2013). Their involvement should be meaningful (Alcohol Concern, 2011) and their views need to be thoroughly considered throughout the intervention with regular discussion and allowing a sense of 'ownership' and contribution to the plans (YJB, 2012). Visually, the Tightrope encourages 'a child centred approach' as championed by Munro (2011) with the character on the tightrope, representing the young person, based in the centre of the page. An encouraging anecdote from a Youth Offending Team worker was about a young person who was particularly volatile but would avoid discussions about this in their sessions. They were introduced to the Tightrope and understood the analogy immediately, got hold of the cards and mapped them out on a flipchart. The young person recognised how high [volatile] they were but was also proud to point out how long the balance beam was [identifying skills and attributes]. Together the young person and worker were able to formulate and agree a plan.

Conclusion

This paper offers a tool and framework for professionals working with young people to engage them in a process of positively identifying and managing volatility. The aim is to achieve a balance in practice of positive engagement alongside transparent risk analysis.

With the array of services that particularly volatile young people may face this tool offers a single integrated platform for sharing information, analysing assessments and building plans. By encouraging the young person to choose relevant prompts and engage in the analysis of factors it offers a more interactive and empowering self-assessment tool than currently offered.

The Tightrope could also be used to:

- Build a one-page picture to present to panels
- Hold group work activities (perhaps with high-wire confidence courses or with a masking tape on the floor acting as a role-play aid)
- Animate discussion with parents or carers about the behaviour of their child and their role as the 'safety-net'
- Educate practitioners in the different elements of a risk assessment.

It is hoped that the tool will encourage a dialogue about volatile behaviour and a holistic approach that allows personal experiences, perceptions and cultural values to be discussed while acknowledging past harm and identifying current strengths: a conversation that bridges assessments with most young people and their parents/carers. The approach fits with a number of disciplines and can be applied alongside a number of existing frameworks aimed at engaging young people, not only in youth justice, mental health or substance misuse but also in child protection and work involving significant transitions into adulthood. Parenting practitioners, whereby the parent and their teenage child have mapped out a Tightrope each, have also used the tool. Students on social work courses have used the analogy to consider their learning journey. Others have considered the analogy helpful to map out a project or transition that involves risks.

Pilots, training packages and consultations have drawn initial positive feedback from practitioners and young people about the value of the tool. The use of the Tightrope analogy does not necessarily require the use of any form or materials. The greatest test was to see whether workers found the analogy or prompts helpful to engage in positive conversations to allow a balanced assessment, and whether young people found it helpful to understand and participate in their assessments. In this regard, the tool seems to have been successful with the workers and young people that have used it to date. Experienced practitioners are invited to try out the analogy and enter the debate in regard to holistic assessments, engagement tools and interactive models of analysis.

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