

Co-Designing an Emotion-Focused Parenting Programme to Promote Youth Mental Health:

Preliminary Findings from an Experience-Based Co-Design Study with Parents, Adolescents, and Youth Mental Health and Family Support Professionals

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JIGSAW

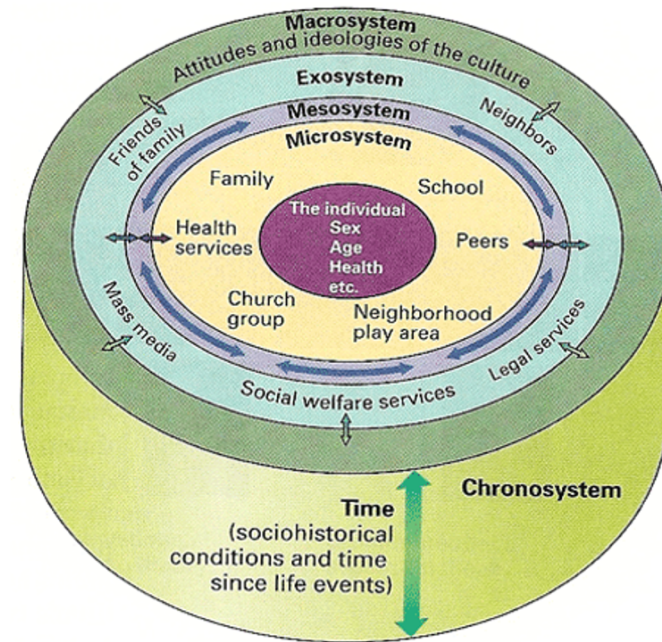
Young people's
health in mind



Taighde Éireann
Research Ireland



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Bioecological Model
(Bronfenbrenner, 1979)



Theory of Parental
Socialisation of Emotion
(Eisenberg et al., 1998)

Background

- **Adolescence as a sensitive period:** Marked by major neurobiological, emotional, and social changes, increasing vulnerability to mental health conditions [1].
- **Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15–29-year-olds, and ~15% of adolescents experience a mental health condition** (WHO, 2025) [2].
- **Emotion regulation is a core transdiagnostic process influencing mental health and the development of suicidal thoughts and behaviour** [3].
- **Parents' awareness, acceptance, and 'coaching' of emotions shape adolescents' emotion regulation, psychological adjustment, and vulnerability to suicide risk** [4].
- **There remains a lack of accessible, practical, and evidence-based supports to help parents foster adolescents' emotional development and wellbeing** [5].

*There is an urgent need for **scalable, preventative, and family-focused interventions** within a stepped-care model to strengthen adolescent emotion regulation, and harness parenting as a pathway to promote adolescent mental health to protect against suicide.*



This study aims to **co-develop an emotion-focused parent education programme** for **early intervention in adolescent mental health**, by **integrating the perspectives of adolescents (aged 12-25 years), parents/caregivers, and youth mental health and family support professionals**.



RQ1. How do adolescents, parents/caregivers, and professionals understand adolescent emotional development, emotion regulation, and youth mental health?



RQ2. What needs, priorities, and challenges do stakeholders identify in supporting adolescent emotional development and mental health within parent–youth relationships?



RQ3. What programme components, delivery formats, and implementation considerations do stakeholders identify as important for a parent-focused programme?

Qualitative, Participatory Co-Design Study



Embedded process evaluation to capture experiences taking part

Experience-Based Co-Design Framework (Bate et al., 2006)



Purposive Sampling

Multi-Channel Strategy:

Open recruitment supported by Community-Based Sites in Co. Limerick, Co. Clare, Co. Dublin, Co. Galway, Co. Cork

Participants (N ≈ 83)

- **Adolescents** aged 12–25 (**n = 29**) *Focus Groups (60-90 minutes)*
- **Parents and Caregivers** (**n ≈ 22**) *1:1 Semi-structured Interviews (60-90 minutes)*
- **Professionals** (**n = 32**) *Focus Groups, 1:1 Semi-structured Interviews*

Professional occupations reflect:

Clinical, Counselling, Educational, Academic

Psychologists, Social Worker, Youth Worker, Occupational Therapist, Paediatric Nurses

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019)

Materials | Focus Group + 1:1 Semi-Structured Interview Components



Photo Elicitation Exercise

“Choose a card that...”

- “...shows how young people experience strong emotions (**pleasant or unpleasant**)”
- “...captures something that comes to mind when you think about your experience of parenting (**feeling, challenge, highlight**)”
- “...captures your experience working with adolescents and their families (**common theme, challenge or insight, role**)”

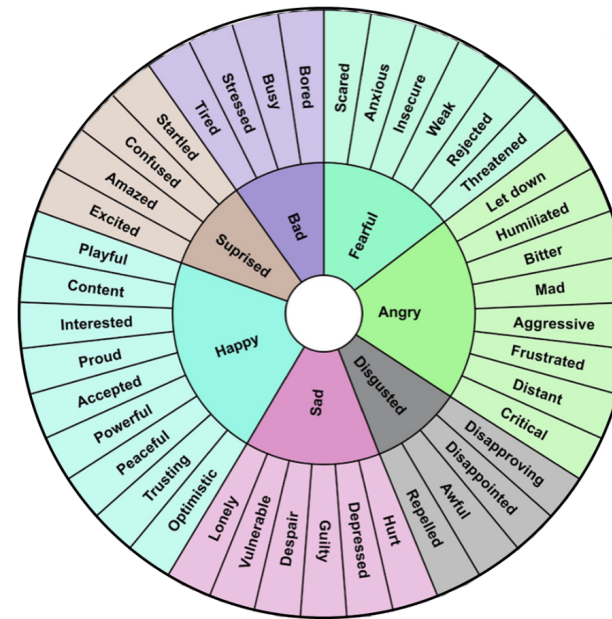


Semi-Structured Topic Guides

Reviewed by Youth & Community Partners

Youth (aged 12-25), Parents & Caregivers, Professionals: (45 - 90 minutes)

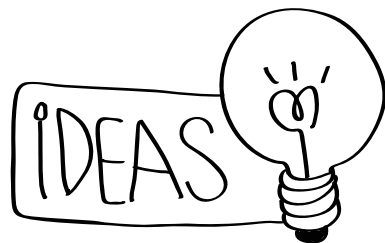
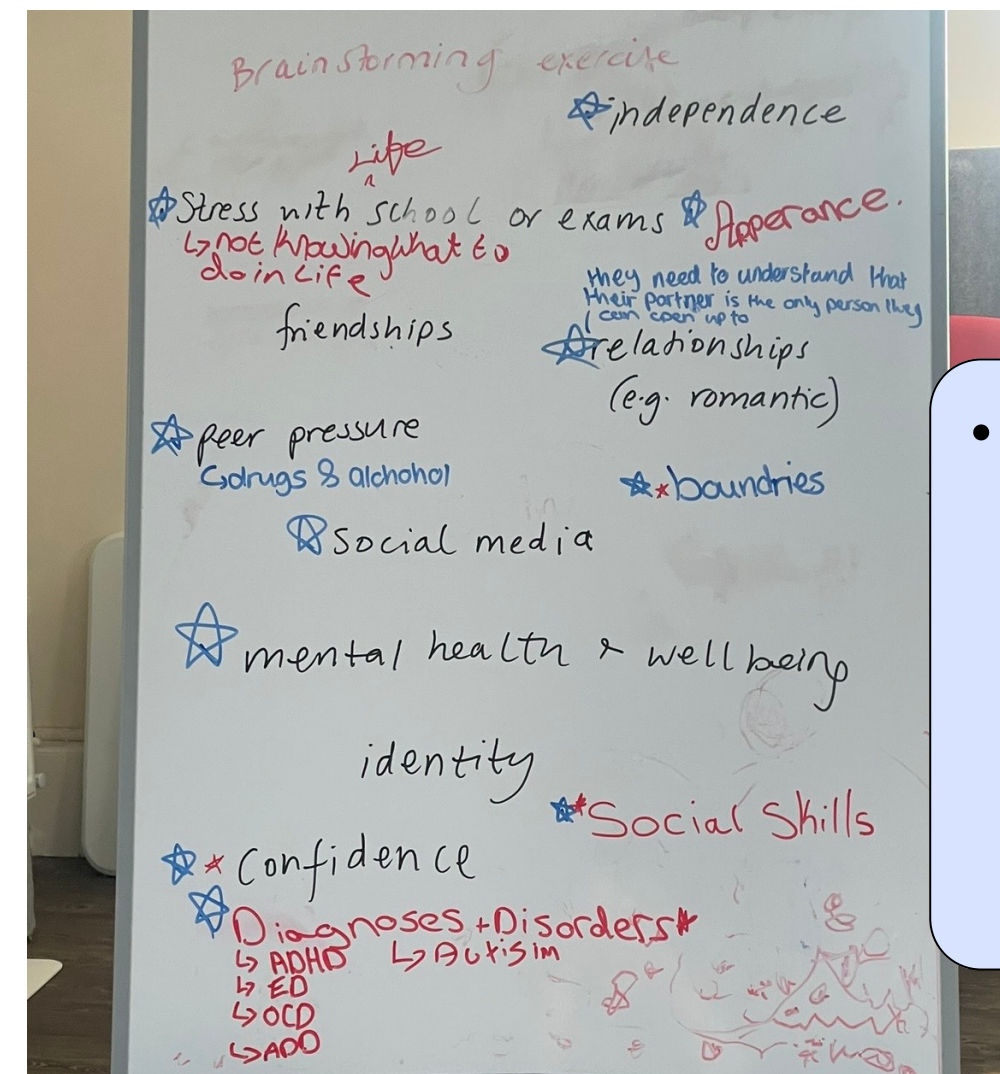
Key Topic 1	Perspectives on adolescent emotional development and mental health
Key Topic 2	Helpful and unhelpful ways of managing emotions
Key Topic 3	Parents' and caregivers' role in supporting adolescent wellbeing
Key Topic 4	Perspectives on co-designing a parenting programme (content and delivery)



Feelings Wheel (Youth FGs)

- Scaffold discussions around strong emotions and ways of **managing emotions** (both **helpful** and **unhelpful**)

Brainstorm Exercise (Youth FGs)



- Identify **key challenges** experienced by **young people**, where **support from parents or caregivers could make a difference**

‘Star’ Voting Exercise

Preliminary Theme 1: Developing emotional and mental health literacy in parents and young people

Illustrative Quotes

*"You **experience emotions** and you **don't really know whether they're okay to feel**...Once you get a **better understanding of your emotions**, you **feel more comfortable feeling the ugly stuff**. Emotions can be a sign that could help you **understand yourself and your mental health better.**"*

Young Person

*"Us, as parents, probably **don't even understand it ourselves properly**. Sometimes I **don't feel confident at all...mental health is always there**, but I **don't know, it seems to be getting worse**...I kind of reached a point where...**I thought I could deal with this and support them, but it was just too much**"*

Parent / Caregiver

*"We can't change what we're not aware of. So I think **before we can regulate anything, we have to be aware of the emotions that we're feeling**...I think that **emotional literacy piece is really important**. So, yeah, that would be the first thing...**people's assumptions they make about the behaviour or dysregulation are kind of a gap.**"*

Professional

Preliminary Theme 1: Developing emotional and mental health literacy in parents and young people

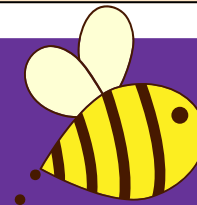
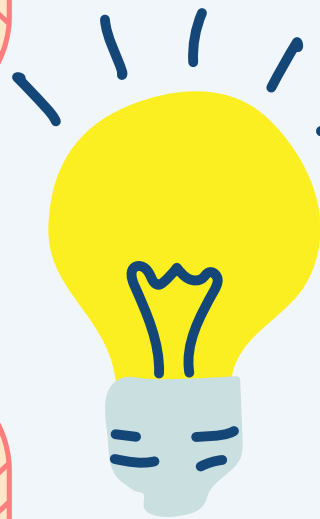
Youth, parents and professionals highlighted a need for **trustworthy, accessible, and non-judgemental guidance** to help families **understand adolescent development**, strengthen **emotional literacy**, build **confidence**, and **recognise pathways** to support.

Understanding adolescent development through a neuroaffirming lens

Building shared, a non-stigmatising language for emotions and mental health

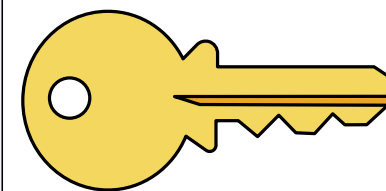
Strengthening parent/caregiver confidence and empowerment

Recognising distress and pathways to appropriate supports



Programme Priorities

- **Develop accessible, universal psychoeducation** that “**builds a shared language**” for naming, normalising, and responding to emotions.
- Support parents/caregivers to **understand adolescent emotional development**, associated **challenges**, and **diverse regulation needs**.
- Support parents'/caregivers ability to **recognise distress** and **identify pathways** to timely **support**.



Design Principles

TRUSTWORTHY, NON-JUDGEMENTAL, STRENGTHS-BASED, NEUROAFFIRMING ENCOURAGE SUPPORT-SEEKING, AGE & STAGE APPROPRIATE, CONSISTENT FRIENDLY, FUN, PRACTICAL, MULTI-MODAL

Preliminary Theme 2: Fostering empathic and attuned parent-youth relationships

Illustrative Quotes

"I also feel like young people don't want to feel like a burden...that's why it's so much easier for us to just turn to social media. I feel like for that to change, I'd need a lot more validation knowing that I'm not causing my parents to be sad or to worry about me."



"[Young people] are not speaking to their parents properly about things and, you know, we'll just get on with this and I won't say it and then 'it'll go away' kind of a thing, but it doesn't go away...if you don't talk about it, you can't get the help. And this is where the trouble comes in."



"We've talked about it, but the importance of connection as the foundation for anything around emotional co-regulation and emotional well-being...actually in the teen years, it does get harder...how to help parents connect and communicate with young people."



Preliminary Theme 2: Fostering empathic and attuned parent-youth relationships

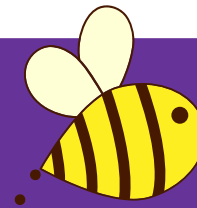
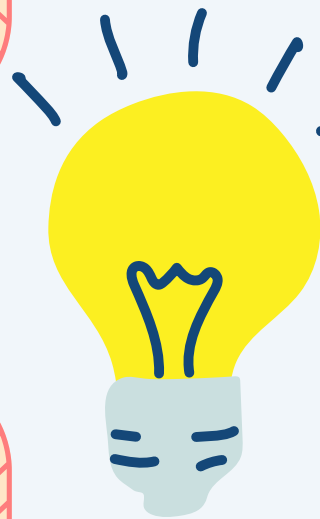
Youth, parents/caregivers, and professionals highlighted the need for **psychologically safe parent-youth relationships, supportive, empathic communication, relational availability, and healthy boundaries; access to peer-support spaces**

Active listening and supportive responding (feeling heard and understood)

Relational availability through everyday connection, quality time and curiosity

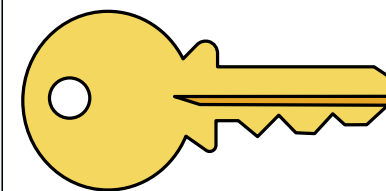
Facilitate structured peer-support spaces with parents/caregivers and professionals

Authoritative parenting style: warmth, structure, and autonomy support



Programme Priorities

- Develop parents'/caregivers' skills in **active listening and supportive responding**, ensure young people feel heard and understood before advice is offered
- Promote an **authoritative parenting approach** warmth, structure, and recognising youth autonomy; transparency in parent-decision making
- Build **practical skills** for **repairing relational ruptures** (e.g., Non-Violent Communication)
- Facilitate structured **parental peer support** for parents to **share their stories**, learn from others, develop confidence addressing common challenges.



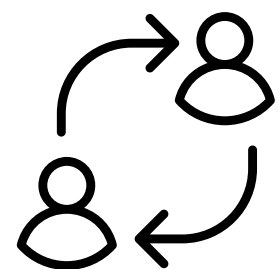
Design Principles

PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE (RESPECTFUL, CONFIDENTIAL), SKILLS-BASED, EXPERIENTIAL, GROUNDED IN EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES, ACTIVE LEARNING, INTEGRATED WITH COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Preliminary Theme 3: Supporting adolescent and parent emotion regulation

Illustrative Quotes

"I feel that if parents have very obviously bad coping mechanisms where they are not good at handling their emotions, then their children might not be comfortable with handling their emotions. So, parenting might require working on yourself as well as working on your relationship with your child."



Young Person

"I suppose demonstrating how I would go about managing emotional challenges and managing things emotionally is important... and making sure that they have other good role models to learn those skills from...maintain a family routine where, you know, it's okay to talk...keeping active, getting good sleep, getting good food, make sure that they're aware of other support systems"

Parent / Caregiver

"Both [parents'] own regulation and their child's regulation...Emotion coaching is really important...parents can help their child talk through what they're feeling without invalidating their experience...So emotion coaching in times of distress is really important too."



Professional

Preliminary Theme 3: Supporting family emotion regulation (emotion-focused, strengths-based)

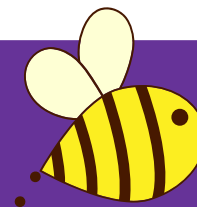
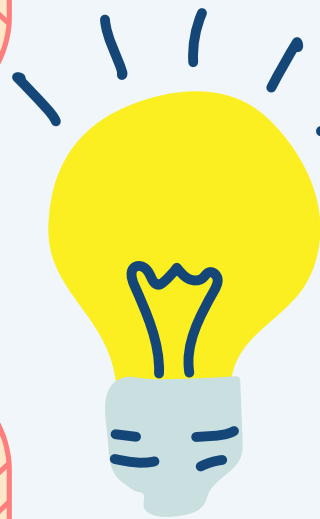
Youth, parents/caregivers, and professionals highlighted **emotion regulation as a core mechanism** influencing adolescent mental health, emphasising the need to **support both young people's regulation and parents' capacity to model regulation in daily life.**

Parents as emotional role models

Taking an emotion coaching approach to supporting young people

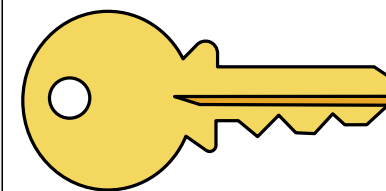
Co-regulating in moments of distress (emotion coaching), feedback loop*

Create a holistic system of supports (daily routine and encouraging support seeking)



Programme Priorities

- ***Ground the programme within an Emotion Coaching approach** (notice, pause, validate, co-regulate, guide, reflect and repair), neuroaffirming and aware of sensory regulation
- Develop **parents'/caregivers' awareness of their own emotion regulation skills**
- **Youth feedback loop: encouraging parents to ask young people what they need**
- Support families to **embed holistic wellbeing practices into daily routines**, including sleep, nutrition, movement, communication, and support-seeking.



Design Principles

YOUTH CENTRED, EMOTION FOCUSED
HOLISTIC, PRACTICAL, NON-PRESCRIPTIVE
UPSTREAM APPROACH TO SUPPORTING
YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

Potential Implications

The potential impact of a digital, scaleable emotion-focused parenting programme:

- Aligned with Jigsaw's stepped model of care, the programme aims to complement existing youth mental health supports by **strengthening the capacity of families and communities** to promote adolescent mental health and harness parents and caregivers as the primary relational context for youth.
- In doing so, it aims to contribute to a system where fewer young people become vulnerable to suicidal thoughts and behaviours, and where support is available earlier, closer to home, and within everyday relationships.

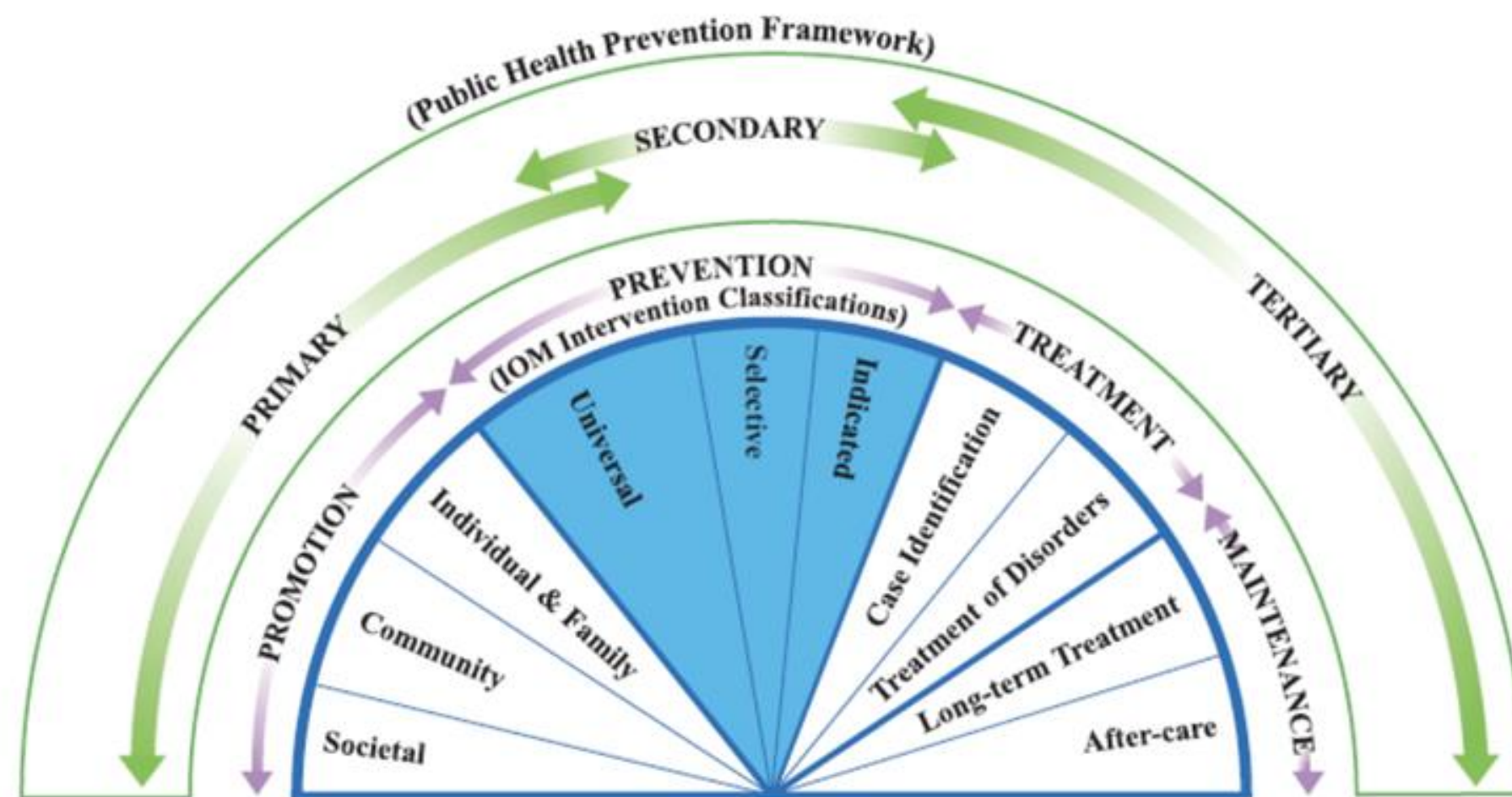
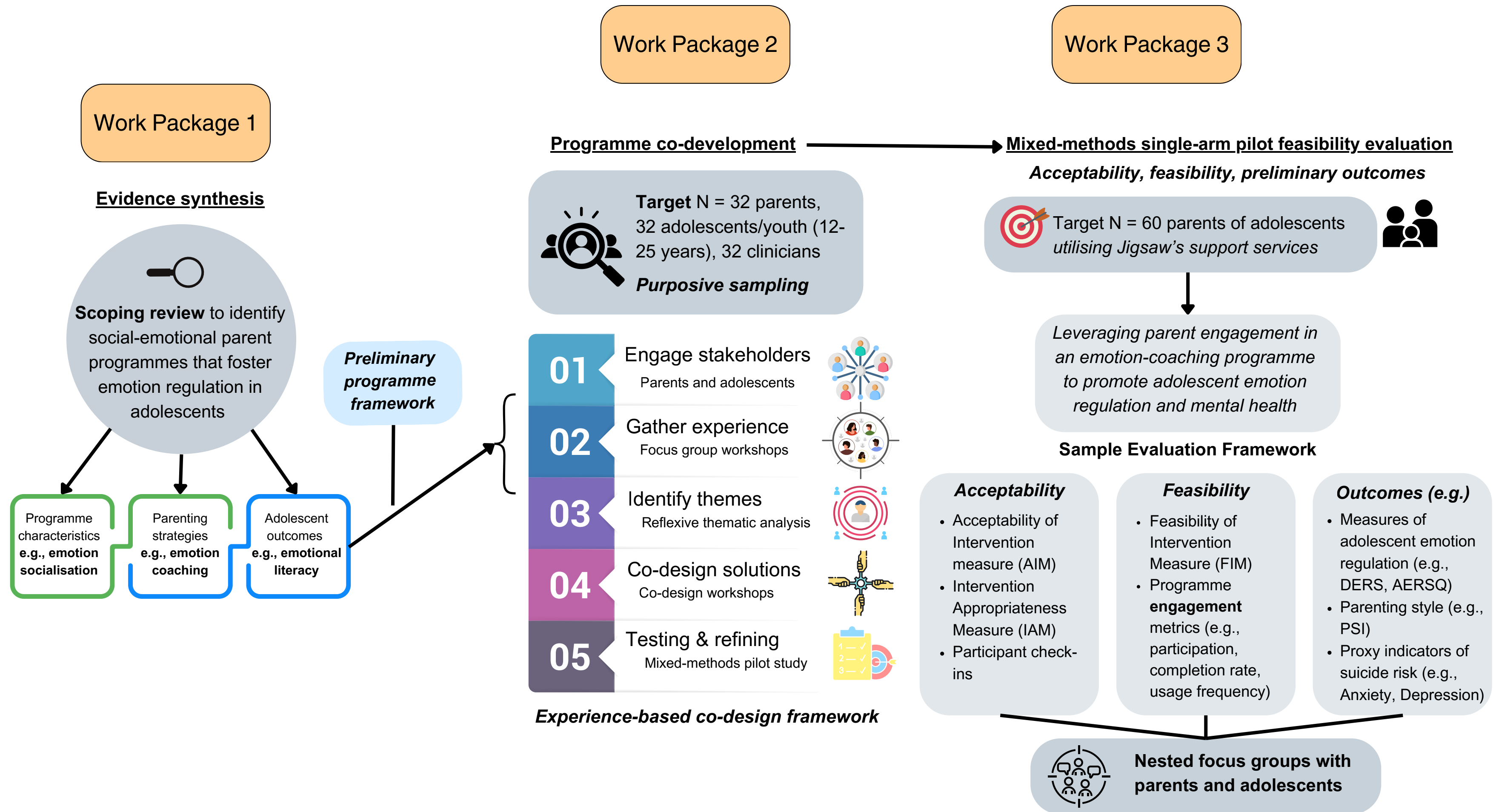


FIGURE 1-1 Overlap of two prevention models: The Institute of Medicine (IOM) intervention classifications and the public health prevention framework.
SOURCES: Institute of Medicine, 1994 (IOM Intervention Classifications); Katz and Ali, 2009 (Public Health Prevention Framework); adapted from NASEM (2019b).



Thank you for your interest and attention.

Thank you to all the young people, parents and caregivers, and professionals for taking part in this research.

*Any feedback and questions are really appreciated!
Please reach out if you are interested.*

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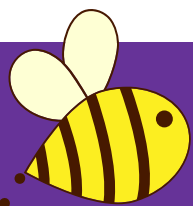
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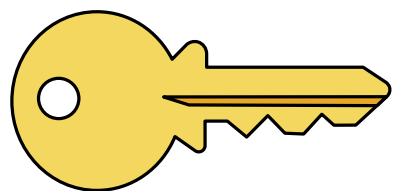
 **SCY LAB**
School, Child & Youth
Mental Health & Well-being Lab



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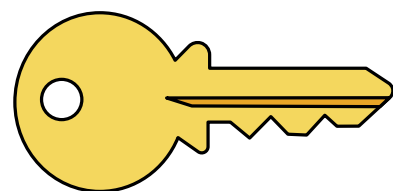
High-Level Preliminary Programme Priorities – Recap



Youth, parents and professionals highlighted a need for **trustworthy, accessible, and non-judgemental guidance** to help families **understand adolescent development**, strengthen **emotional literacy**, build **confidence**, and **recognise pathways** to support.

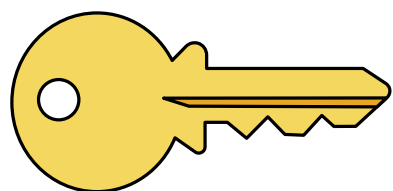
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HOLISTIC, PRACTICAL, NON-PRESCRIPTIVE
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Youth, parents/caregivers, and professionals highlighted the need for **psychologically safe parent–youth relationships, supportive, empathic communication**, relational **availability**, and healthy **boundaries**; access to **peer-support spaces**

PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE (RESPECTFUL,
CONFIDENTIAL), SKILLS-BASED,
EXPERIENTIAL, GROUNDED IN EVERYDAY
EXPERIENCES, ACTIVE LEARNING,
INTEGRATED WITH COMMUNITY SUPPORT



Youth, parents/caregivers, and professionals highlighted **emotion regulation as a core mechanism** influencing **adolescent mental health**, emphasising the need to **support both young people's regulation and parents' capacity to model regulation** in daily life.

TRUSTWORTHY, NON-JUDGEMENTAL,
STRENGTHS-BASED, NEUROAFFIRMING
ENCOURAGE SUPPORT-SEEKING,
AGE & STAGE APPROPRIATE, CONSISTENT
FRIENDLY, FUN, PRACTICAL, MULTI-MODAL

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Defining Emotion Regulation



"One definition that stems from the developmental literature on emotion regulation and was developed specifically to be clinically useful and inform treatment development and modification is KL Gratz and L Roemer's definition. Consistent with research on the functionality of emotions and paradoxical consequences of efforts to avoid or control emotions, this definition focuses on adaptive ways of responding to emotional distress, including the awareness, understanding, and acceptance of emotions, ability to control impulsive behaviors and engage in goal-directed behaviors when experiencing negative emotions, flexible use of situationally appropriate strategies to modulate the intensity and duration of emotional responses in order to meet individual goals and situational demands, and a willingness to experience negative emotions in pursuit of desired goals. This is the definition that will be used here."

Gratz and colleagues, 2015

Approach to Evaluating the Programme



Proxy indicators:

- Outcomes will assess protective factors (emotion regulation, psychological flexibility, connectedness) and risk indicators (internalising symptoms, family conflict). *Measures: DERS-16, AAQ-II, SDQ.*

Construct–measure alignment:

- To address poor construct–fit common in the field, measures will directly reflect programme targets, e.g., Parent Emotion Socialization Questionnaire (PESQ) and Emotion Coaching Questionnaire (ECQ).

Developmentally sensitive assessment:

- ER measures often require high metacognitive awareness; we will use age-appropriate tools such as the ERQ-CA and CAMM.

Multi-informant approach:

- Combine parent-report (e.g., PESQ, SDQ-Parent) and adolescent self-report (e.g., DERS-16, ERQ-CA) to capture relational and emotional change.

Conceptual clarity:

- Adopt a developmentally informed, clinically relevant definition of ER as the flexible use of emotion processes to support wellbeing.

**Work Package 1: Evidence Synthesis (Scoping Review)**

Apply scoping methodology to map existing literature on parenting and emotion-focused programmes that address adolescent emotion regulation (e.g., programme content, parenting techniques, adolescent outcomes), contextualising findings relevant to adolescent mental health.

**Work Package 2: Programme Co-Development**

To co-develop a family-centred, emotion-focused parenting programme, in partnership with parents, adolescents, and relevant stakeholders (e.g., mental health professionals), informed by best practice in emotion socialisation and youth mental health promotion to strengthen adolescent emotion regulation and mental health literacy.

**Work Package 3: Mixed-Methods, Single-Arm Pilot Feasibility & Acceptability Trial**

- i) Evaluate the feasibility and acceptability of the emotion-focused parenting programme for parents and adolescents.
- ii) Explore **preliminary outcomes concerning the relationship between parent participation and changes in adolescent emotion regulation, mental health, and proxy outcomes** (suicide risk/protective factors) while **identifying potential mechanisms of change**.