

# THE TACKLING NEET TOOLKIT



**ALISON DOUTHWAITE AND CERI BROWN OUTLINE SOME EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS TO SUSTAIN ENGAGEMENT**

Many readers will be aware that alarming numbers of young people in the UK are currently outside of education, employment or training. The Tackling NEET Toolkit, developed through research at the University of Bath and in collaboration with multiple partners across education, careers, employment and skills, offers practitioners research-informed resources to maximise the effectiveness of their work. This article outlines what makes interventions effective and the resources available to put this into practice at: [connectedbelonging.co.uk](https://connectedbelonging.co.uk).

## Effective interventions are based on a holistic view of risk

While some risk factors for becoming NEET are widely recognised (e.g. having SEND, or being from a low-income family), the role played by other domains of risk can be neglected. Thinking about ‘risk’ more holistically is an essential foundation for effective support.

We identified over 150 risk factors for NEET, but no systematic approach to considering these when supporting individuals or shaping policy. Our holistic model of risk (see Figure 1) categorises these many risks into five domains: personal challenges, family circumstances, social relationships, institutional features and structural factors (Brown et al., 2021). This helps practitioners and policymakers more manageably consider the full range of factors impacting an individual’s trajectory and can prompt consideration of risk factors not addressed by existing support.

## Support must consider interlinked risks

Thinking holistically about risk involves recognising that risks across these domains interconnect. While professional roles may focus on a discrete domain, successfully unpicking challenges with individuals at greatest risk of disengagement requires consideration

of how issues from different domains combine to create barriers. This echoes insights into the role of ‘compound disadvantage’ (Impetus, 2025), where risk factors amplify or exacerbate each other.

## CASE STUDY: INTERLINKED RISKS

Jaz is in Year 11 and interested in apprenticeships.

### Personal Challenges

- Very shy
- GCSE predictions: English 3, Maths 2
- Dyslexia suspected but never investigated

### Structural factors

- Lives in a village
- Very limited public transport
- Nearest FE college 40+ minutes away
- Apprenticeship options require Level 4 English and Maths

### Institutional factors

- Current school’s post-16 entry requirements unattainable for her
- Support focused on boosting academic attainment

### Social relationship factors

- One close friend is going to a different college
- Struggles to make friends and talk to adults

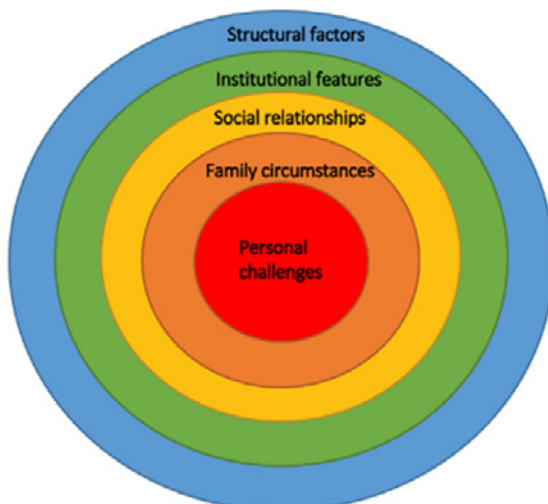
### Family circumstances

- Working parents
- Socio-economic deprivation
- No car, no computer
- Parents against apprenticeships, prefer Jaz stays in education to keep child benefits

### Interlinked Risks

Limited transport infrastructure (structural), socio-economic deprivation (family) and lack of accessible post-16 options at her school (institutional) compound her literacy challenges and low attainment (personal challenges), reducing her access to opportunities to make/sustain friends (social relationships) and compounding her social anxiety and shyness (personal). Together they reduce her options and create extra hurdles to sustaining engagement.

Figure 1: Five domains of NEET



## Having support versus feeling supported

Attention to external, measurable characteristics is an important part of targeting groups experiencing greater risk of disengagement. However, our research reveals that attention to affective, softer measures is

essential for effective support. It is not support being available that makes a difference; it is that the individual *feels supported*. Discussing what will make a tangible difference with young people and helping them talk about their interests makes interventions feel supportive and relevant to them.

### The importance of relational aspects of support

We found over 316 support strategies to tackle NEET outcomes; the top-rated factor was the qualities of the educator themselves. Ensuring practitioners providing support understand these attributes will maximise the chances of an intervention's success.

### The qualities of the educator

- Persistence – going the extra mile
- Flexibility
- Good communication
- Keeping promises
- Personal experiences of the young person's culture or challenge
- Reliability
- Knowing pupils well
- Intuition and responsiveness
- Apologising when wrong
- Organised
- High but realistic expectations

'She never gave up on me, even when I was hard to get hold of' (young person).

'She proper gets me' (young person).

'We have a chat if I'm having a bad day' (young person).

Young people identified social relationships and institutional factors as being most significant to their disengagement, underscoring that relational aspects of support make a difference and are most keenly felt by them (Brown et al., 2022). This echoes the Effective Transitions Fund findings that the support of a trusted adult, feeling listened to, being supported and valued, and having contact with people they can relate to and who understand their barriers, are key (Williams et al., 2024).

### Thirteen effective intervention strategies

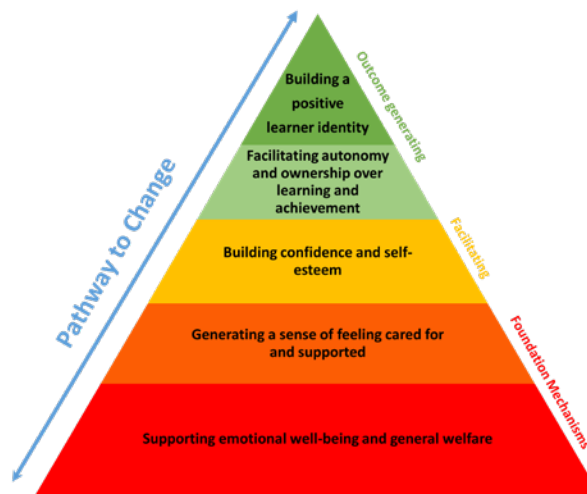
Intervention approaches evaluated in the study range from support for transitions and personalised plans, to family engagement and support for healthy relationships. They can be tailored to different contexts and individuals. Each strategy is unpacked across three handbooks which signpost activity ideas and further resources, while case studies offer inspiration.

### What makes interventions effective

Effective interventions share certain processes or steps. Across different activities, settings and cohorts, we identified a shared 'pathway to change' (see Figure 2) to help practitioners target and evaluate the impact of support (Brown et al, 2022a).

People at different stages on the pathway need different types and levels of support. Foundational stages involve supporting emotional wellbeing and welfare, and generating a sense of feeling cared for and supported. These require one-to-one, personalised support and

**Figure 2: The pathway to change: Five mechanisms for tackling the risks to NEET**



can take a long time, especially for clients with trauma, ACEs, or whose needs have not been met for some time. Addressing these leads to the building of confidence and self-esteem. Young people at this tier are likely to attend regularly, manage in small group settings and be hopeful and interested in future plans. From here, nurturing autonomy, ownership and a positive learner identity enables meaningful engagement with learning or work goals.

### Conclusion

The Tackling NEET Toolkit supports interventions which respond to a holistic view of risk with well-pitched interventions which prioritise a relational focus and attention to the individual's interests and needs. Ensuring that work to prepare young people for their future lives is informed by these insights and shared across the different tiers of the careers ecosystem will offer a robust response to the unprecedented levels of disengagement among young people.

### References

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