

# Walking and talking

Major Helen Schofield introduces Side-by-Side, a resource to help support young people during the coronavirus pandemic and beyond



**E**SSENTIAL to every relationship is the connection that comes from being 'with'. This past year our connections have looked very different, but we've discovered that they are just as important as they've always been. In the midst of disruption, the thing we need more than ever is 'witness'.

'Witness' is an unfamiliar but beautiful word that describes this essential connection to God and others. It is a closeness that shows our friends and family that we care, that we can get through any situation together. By listening to each other's fears, being honest about our anxiety, celebrating moments of happiness and sharing good news stories of those who have found God in times of hardship, we can offer hope and witness to our faith.

We see what it looks like throughout the Bible. Ruth refusing to leave Naomi's side (see Ruth 1:16) and Elisha telling Elijah 'I will not leave you' (2 Kings 2:2) are just two examples. God made witness with himself possible through Jesus, 'God with us' (Matthew 1:23).

At this time no one needs witness and a genuine offer of hope more than our children and young people. Experts are predicting that the coronavirus pandemic will define this young generation, even giving them a label: the Covid generation. It's becoming clear that children and young people are likely to face the consequences of the pandemic for many years – potentially their whole lives. Some recent headlines and reports highlight the issue: 'Behind closed bedroom doors, a teenage

mental health crisis is brewing' (*The Guardian* 29 January); 'I fear a loneliness epidemic among young people' (*The Independent* 18 January); 'Young people have told us that they often feel afraid, sad or bad about themselves' (The Mental Health Foundation 31 January); 'This is a universal crisis and, for some children, the impact will be lifelong' (Unicef October 2020).

What should our response be to this 'universal crisis'? While we all look forward to a gradual easing of restrictions, it may be many weeks or months until our youth and children's programmes are fully functioning again. How can we support young people right now as they face these unprecedented challenges in their lives?

I would like to encourage all our corps to respond to the heart of witness – simply to be with, to come alongside a young person in friendship, saying: ‘I care about you; you still matter.’

That’s what Side-by-Side seeks to do. Working safely within social distancing restrictions and safeguarding procedures, Side-by-Side is a walk-and-talk befriending model, in which a committed and consistent adult befriender from outside the family home will meet regularly with a young person for a short walk and a talk.

There is no agenda to move from ‘A to B’, to see improvements in behaviour or to measure progress on a scale. The aim is simply to walk, have some fun, get some fresh air and exercise and chat about anything. Young people may want to talk about how they are feeling or what is happening in their home and family – or they may not. They may simply value the opportunity to chat to a different human being than the ones they have been stuck with every day.

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The befriender is there to promote positive emotional and physical wellbeing and extend the young person’s support network, signposting to further support where necessary. The befriender’s purpose is to listen, encourage and be there at a time when young people need connection more than ever.

One youth worker said this about what they had done as a befriender: ‘Last Saturday I spent an hour doing something I once took for granted. I met with a young person from my youth group who I hadn’t met with physically for a year. We walked, sat and walked some more as we caught up on what had been the strangest year of our lives. We spoke about experiences of lockdown and home learning. But importantly, we spoke about films, sports, birthday parties and past youth group socials. This brought a smile, laughter and much-needed hope and distraction. We simply walked and talked, side by side. But that hour brought so much joy to both of us. It was an hour on a Saturday morning truly well spent.’

The point of all this is witness. The beauty is in the friendship.

The target age group for Side-by-Side is seven to seventeen, and the model can be used with children and young people already in the corps, as well as those in the community who are usually in contact through corps programmes.

This is not a new concept. A quick search for ‘walk and talk’ online shows the approach is used by professional counsellors and coaches as well as walking groups. It is used to promote physical health and emotional and social wellbeing in people of all ages. It joins together people who have experienced bereavement, disability or heart attacks.

Side-by-Side is not some huge project that will need paid personnel and a complicated infrastructure; it simply requires some volunteers willing to walk alongside young people. However, it must be done safely. There can be no shortcuts to safe working practices. From the recruitment of befrienders and obtaining permission from parents to setting up walk-and-talk routes, we must stay mindful of the protection of young people and volunteers. A set of documents will soon be available on the Youth and Children’s Ministries webpage to help you launch Side-by-Side in the safest possible way in your setting, including essential safeguarding and safe mission checklists.

The Salvation Army is committed to ‘going’, to being where the need is. So let’s go, let’s walk side by side and let’s be with.

● Side-by-Side will be available at [salvationarmy.org.uk/youth-and-children](https://salvationarmy.org.uk/youth-and-children)

**MAJOR SCHOFIELD IS TERRITORIAL YOUTH AND CHILDREN’S SECRETARY**

