

Galaxy of Relationships

Art-based methods for exploring healthy relationships with young people

Diego Marín Romera

Gestalt therapist and Gestalt theatre therapist · President, YOMN — Red Europea Los Jóvenes Importan Ahora · School of Gestalt Theatre and Performative Therapies, Murcia (Spain)

This article previews a toolkit currently in layout. The full booklet will be published by the partnership before the end of the project; the description below reflects its finalised content.

Some young people grow up without the affective anchors the rest of us take for granted. Their early relationships were fragile, interrupted or actively harmful, and by adolescence they carry a weight nobody has helped them name. Youth workers meet them every week. What is often missing is a way in — a method that does not depend on a young person being able to talk about feelings in a language nobody ever taught them.

Galaxy of Relationships is a 24-month Erasmus Plus KA220-YOU Cooperation Partnership (reference 2024-1-RO01-KA220-YOU-000251647), running from 1 November 2024 to 31 October 2026. It is delivered by IPTA in Romania as coordinator, YOMN in Spain and the Latvian State Probation Service, three organisations that have worked together since 2020 and whose practices intersect precisely where this project lives: preventive education, art-based youth work and the reintegration of young people at risk.

Why healthy relationships, specifically

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events or living conditions occurring before the age of eighteen: abuse or neglect, loss, instability at home, violence in the family, addiction or mental illness in a caregiver, severe poverty. The first relationships anyone encounters are family ones, and when those early relationships are unhealthy, a particular way of reading the relational world tends to follow — difficulty trusting, hypervigilance or withdrawal, confusion between care and control, and a reduced sense of having any choice at all.

Poor relational quality sits at the root of self-marginalisation, which leads almost immediately to social exclusion and raises the risk of involvement in unhealthy, risky and illegal activities and communities. Research confirms that teenagers who have experienced ACEs alongside socio-economic hardship are the most exposed to this chain (Camacho and Henderson, *The Social Determinants of ACE*, 2022). The same chain, however, can be walked in the opposite direction: healthy relationships lead to belonging, belonging to decision-making autonomy, and autonomy to protection.

ACEs are not a diagnosis and they are not a destiny. They are experiences, and what experience has shaped, new experience can reshape. That is the wager of the whole project. A teenager who can recognise what a healthy bond feels like, name what makes a harmful one harmful, and choose who enters their personal galaxy is a teenager who is considerably harder to recruit into harm.

What the partnership produced

Three interconnected art-based outputs, developed collaboratively and tested through two rounds of local testing with teenagers in Romania, Spain and Latvia.

- A toolkit of 21 experiential methods organised into five methodological families, written in a homogeneous, ready-to-facilitate format for youth workers, educators, psychologists and therapists.
- A Silent Book: a wordless picture book following a group of teenagers through difficult moments and their effort to build resilience with the support of peers and community. It is structured on the Hero's Journey and speaks every language and none, since the reader supplies the words.
- An illustrated card deck of 52 hand-painted cards gathering the symbols and ingredients of healthy relationships. The artwork draws on earthing tools, Gestalt theatre therapy, expressionism and surrealism: images concrete enough to be entered and open enough to be inhabited differently by each person looking at them.

The deck came out of a gap the partners kept meeting in their own practice. Among the many associative card systems available, none took the building of healthy relationships as its primary focus. This one does.

How the deck actually works

The cards were painted by hand, one by one. That is not a decorative detail. A painted image has lumps, corrections, places where the hand visibly hesitated. Young people read that hesitation without being able to explain it, and it makes the image easier to approach than a clean piece of graphic design.

The basic instruction is deliberately simple: lay the deck face up on the floor or a table and say, take the one that is looking at you. Nobody looks at all fifty-two. The eye travels and something catches before the looking is finished. That hurry of the eye is the point, and it is why the deck is large rather than small. With twelve or fifteen images the choice becomes an examination — few options, all compared against one another, and the head has time to intervene.

The relational quality is on the reverse, not on the face. People choose an image; the word appears afterwards, when they turn the card over. Sometimes it does not match what they thought they had picked, and that mismatch does the work on its own.

The method lives in the gap between choosing and explaining. When a young person looks at an image and says what they see, they are always saying something about themselves — something a direct question would rarely reach. The card also functions as a transitional object: something that can be held, placed, returned or taken home, an external anchor for an internal process that keeps working after the session ends. And in a group, two people choosing the same card and seeing different things in it is a lesson in perspective-taking that needs no explanation.

One warning, because we have seen this go wrong. The image is not there for the young person to discover its meaning. There is no meaning inside the card waiting to be extracted; the card knows nothing. It only offers somewhere to rest the weight while something appears. The moment a facilitator asks what do you think this figure represents for you, the card has become a projective test and the work is over.

The five families, and the depth scale

The 21 methods are grouped by their primary expressive channel. Within each family they are ordered from lower to higher emotional depth on a 1–5 scale shown as dots.

- Visual and art-based methods (9): the participant creates an image — drawing, collage, symbol — which externalises inner experience and becomes a safe object for dialogue.
- Projective and card-centred methods (6): the participant chooses and projects onto the illustrated cards, and the image does the work of finding the connection the mind has not yet been able to name.
- Body and movement methods (3): posture, gesture and movement give shape to relational experience before words arrive.
- Theatre and improvisation methods (2): scenes, statues and role-play make relational dynamics visible, and changeable, on a shared stage.
- Music-led methods (1): shifting soundscapes change how participants relate to images, qualities and to themselves.

The depth scale describes emotional exposure, not value. A 2 is not worse than a 5; it is safer for a new group. The scale exists so that exposure grows only as fast as safety does, and the guidance is to start one level lower than you think a group can hold.

The frame is the method

These tools open things. That is why they work, and it is also the risk. A card, a posture exercise, an empty chair: the tool does not know whether it is being used in a therapy room or in a hostel during a five-day course. The difference is made by what the facilitator does with whatever has opened. These methods are preventive education, not therapy. When a session reveals a situation requiring clinical or safeguarding attention, the facilitator's task is not to treat it but to notice it, close the process safely and refer on.

Five conditions protect the depth of every method in the toolkit. Safety is declared and negotiated rather than assumed, with explicit agreements on confidentiality, voluntary participation and the right to share much, little or nothing. Choice is made with the body: participants stand, walk among the images and choose with the impulse that stops the hand, not with the head. Accompaniment happens without interpretation. Closing is never skipped, even when time runs short — shorten the middle instead. And whenever possible participants keep something physical from the session: the card, a photograph of it, a symbol copied onto paper.

Non-interpretation deserves its own emphasis, because it is the golden rule of projective work and the most frequently broken. The participant is the only legitimate reader of their own image, card, line or river. The facilitator asks, reflects and stays present — what do you see, where do you feel it, what does it remind you of — and never explains what a drawing means or what a card reveals. In group sharing, this discipline is handed to the participants themselves: witnessing is offered as what I saw while listening to you was, never as analysis or advice.

Reflection is anchored in OARS, the questioning framework from motivational interviewing: open questions, affirmations, reflections and summaries. With teenagers who have experienced ACEs, a carelessly run debrief can turn a powerful session into a negative experience. OARS keeps the participant as the expert on their own experience and closes each process pointing forward.

How it was developed

The methods were created by the three partner organisations, then experienced first-hand by 36 youth workers during the project's learning activities in Romania and Spain, and finally tested locally with teenagers aged 14–18 in all three partner countries. The order matters and is the project's guiding principle: first me, then the beneficiaries. Facilitators go through each method as participants before taking it to young people, so that they can anticipate from the inside what the method opens.

Field testing changed the material. Younger teenagers struggled with the abstract notion of values and needed groundwork first. Some methods

proved unsuitable for the youngest groups. Pairs in the more exposing exercises had to be assigned by the facilitator where bullying dynamics existed in a group. All of this is now written into the facilitator notes.

The partnership

- IPTA — Asociația Idei și Proiecte pentru Tineri Activi (Romania, coordinator · OID E10132338). An NGO founded in Oradea in 2014, active across Romania in preventive education focused on healthy relationships and the prevention of addictive behavioural tendencies, working with young people aged 13-20 through art-based tools, embodied expression, mindfulness, creative writing and experiential theatre.
- YOMN — Red Europea Los Jóvenes Importan Ahora (Spain · OID E10085993). A Spanish network working with young people at risk of exclusion, contributing a Gestalt and humanistic approach in the line of Claudio Naranjo together with artistic expertise ranging from art therapy and ceramics to theatre and embodied learning. YOMN contributed six of the methods, hosted one of the two learning activities and led the finalisation of the deck's metaphors and symbols.
- SPS — Valsts probācijas dienests, the Latvian State Probation Service (Latvia · OID E10251451). Founded in 2003 under the Ministry of Justice, with over 400 staff nationwide and two decades of specialised work with young people at risk of offending. SPS brings evidence-based practice in resocialisation and behaviour correction programmes, and the largest multiplier capacity in the consortium.

Availability

The toolkit, the Silent Book and the card deck are project results and will be freely available for adaptation through the Erasmus+ Project Results Platform. The printed deck travels with a pocket guide condensing the facilitation conditions and quick reflective questions, so that it stays usable away from the booklet.

If you work with young people and want to use the material, the honest advice is this: read the booklet before running anything, start with the deck rather than with the body work, and announce the frame at the beginning. The activities themselves are not difficult. Holding what they open is the part that takes practice. We are also interested in hearing where the methods fail — the next revision will be better if it includes contexts we did not anticipate.

Disclaimer

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the National Agency for Community Programs in the Field of Education and Vocational Training (ANPCDEFP). Neither the European Union nor ANPCDEFP can be held responsible for them.