

The Bridge: What Parents Told Us

Key Findings from Our Parent and Carer Consultation

Listening before we build

At Progeny, we are exploring **The Bridge** — a relational pathway for young people who have become increasingly disconnected from education, relationships or everyday life, but who may not yet be ready to engage with school, therapy or other formal support.

Before developing the idea further, we wanted to listen to families already living this reality.

For seven days, parents and carers with direct experience of significant withdrawal and disconnection were invited to share what had happened, what had helped, what had made things harder, and what they wished had been available earlier.

15 parents and carers responded. Fourteen were from Northern Ireland and one from the Republic of Ireland. Most responses concerned young people aged 11–16 who were out of education, increasingly isolated or beginning to withdraw from school and social connection.

Their responses were analysed using an approach informed by **Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis**.

Six key themes emerged.

1. The world had become too much

Parents described anxiety, sensory overwhelm, bullying, difficult transitions, neurodivergence, exhaustion and unmet needs.

For some young people, withdrawal appeared less like a refusal to participate and more like a response to demands they could no longer manage.

“Just can't cope with all the different classes and teachers.”

Several parents described young people who had tried to cope for a long time before reaching a point where school, social contact or everyday expectations felt overwhelming.

What this means for The Bridge

Begin by asking **what is making participation difficult**, rather than assuming the young person simply needs more motivation.

2. Pressure could make things worse

Parents understandably wanted their young people back in education and had often tried very hard to make that happen.

Several, however, reflected that increasing pressure had led to greater anxiety, distress and withdrawal.

“I wish someone had told us to stop pushing her to go to school.”

This does not mean giving up on education or leaving a young person isolated indefinitely. It suggests that when capacity has become very low, **more pressure may produce less engagement**.

What this means for The Bridge

The first goal may sometimes need to be **safety, trust and restored capacity**, with education becoming a later destination rather than the immediate demand.

3. The whole family needs support

Withdrawal affected much more than the young person’s education.

Parents described significant effects on employment, finances, relationships, siblings and their own emotional wellbeing.

One described the impact as:

“Nothing short of devastating in every respect — financially, emotionally, physically.”

Parents often wanted someone knowledgeable to come alongside them earlier — to listen, help them understand what might be happening, navigate available support and provide some sense of direction and hope.

What this means for The Bridge

Supporting the parent may be the first intervention.

The Bridge should be able to begin helping the family even before the young person feels ready to engage directly.

4. Relationship came before change

This was one of the strongest findings.

When parents described adults who had genuinely helped, they repeatedly talked about patience, consistency, acceptance and genuine interest in the young person — rather than a particular programme or technique.

One parent summarised it simply as:

“Building a relationship first.”

Another described a professional who initially spent weeks simply talking with their daughter about books. What might have appeared to be very little progress became:

“the beginning of the relationship that has been the key for change.”

Parents described change beginning when young people felt known as people with their own interests, personalities, hopes and strengths — rather than as problems that needed to be fixed.

What this means for The Bridge

The mentor should not simply deliver a programme.

The relationship itself is central to the work.

Shared interests, curiosity, reliability and genuine connection may need to come before attempts to achieve larger external outcomes.

5. Safety meant choice and predictability

Parents consistently described the importance of young people having some control over how engagement happened.

Safety could mean being able to say no, choosing the pace, knowing what would happen, meeting somewhere comfortable or trusting that refusing one contact would not make the relationship disappear.

One parent highlighted the importance of:

“Being predictable — always do what you say you will do.”

For a deeply withdrawn young person, the first meaningful step might simply be replying to a message, accepting another visit, playing a game or tolerating another person being present.

What this means for The Bridge

Engagement should be **low-demand, predictable and collaborative**.

Small steps genuinely need to be small.

6. Continuity matters

Parents were positive about the idea of The Bridge, but they also gave an important warning.

Some had experienced short-term services that ended just as their young person began to trust someone.

“The relationship is just starting to get somewhere and then it stops.”

Parents also stressed that no two young people or families are exactly the same. What feels safe and engaging for one young person may not work for another.

What this means for The Bridge

If relationship matters, **continuity and individualisation matter too.**

The Bridge will need carefully chosen mentors, appropriate matching, realistic expectations and enough continuity to protect the relationships being built.

The central finding: Relationship before recovery

Across all six themes, one message stood out:

Relationship before recovery

Parents described a pattern that could look like:

Overwhelming demands → distress → withdrawal → a shrinking world → increasing pressure → greater distress

But they also described another possible pathway:

Reduced pressure → greater safety → trusted relationship → small positive experiences → growing confidence → wider participation

This has helped us shape the emerging Bridge model around four stages:

REACH

Support the family first.

CONNECT

Build trust through gentle, consistent relationship.

RECONNECT

Take small steps into relationships, activities and a wider world.

TRANSITION

Walk alongside whatever appropriate next step emerges — whether education, therapy, training, employment or community.

Rethinking what success looks like

Parents also challenged us to think differently about progress.

For a deeply withdrawn young person, success may initially mean leaving their bedroom, speaking to somebody new, rediscovering an interest, going outside or reconnecting with one person.

These may appear to be very small steps, but they can represent significant movement for a young person whose world has become increasingly restricted.

Education remains important. But for some young people, **education may need to become the destination of the bridge rather than the entrance requirement.**

What happens next?

This was a small exploratory consultation. It does not prove that The Bridge will work, nor can 15 families represent every young person experiencing withdrawal.

What it does provide is a clear direction for development.

The next stage will need to translate these findings into a safe and credible model — including parent support, carefully selected and trained mentors, neurodiversity- and trauma-informed practice, appropriate safeguarding and supervision, individualised matching, meaningful continuity and direct input from young people themselves.

Most importantly, the parents who responded have reinforced the central idea behind The Bridge:

****Start with the family.**

Build relationship without pressure.

Take small steps.

Stay alongside the young person as their world begins to widen again.**

For the full methodology, detailed thematic analysis, parent quotations, limitations and coding framework, see:

The Bridge: Parent and Carer Consultation — Qualitative Findings Report, Progeny, September 2026.