



## Full transcription of We're All Right podcast episode 1: Spencer

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Diana: You want them to wrap you in bubble wrap and then start popping the little bubbles.

Laura: Yeah.

[Laughter]

[Intro Music]

Diana: We're All Right is a youth and survivor led participation project facilitated by the Association for Youth People's Health and funded by the Samworth Foundation. We are developing a rights-based approach to supporting young people affected by sexual violence. During the pandemic we were struck by how the situation many young people were forced to live through and the after effects shared similarities with experiences of sexual violence. Article 39 of the UN Convention of Rights of a Child, states that all young people who have experienced trauma have a right to recovery and reintegration which includes health, dignity, self-respect and a social life. We saw this as an opportunity to share the wisdom of young survivors about what recovery and reintegration after a trauma looks like and what makes them possible.

In this podcast series we will be sharing what we have learned from young people affected by sexual violence. That everyone has a role to play in promoting their rights. That we can all do better at responding to their trauma. And that we should all want to work towards a better world for them because spoiler alert, that would be a better world for everyone.

Just a little note on language, we do use the term survivor, we do realise that not everybody identifies with that term but that is what the participants in this project and the Youth Advisors have used and it is a term that we use throughout this

podcast series. In our first episode Spencer shares his story to encourage you to think and work in a rights-based way.

Spencer: I'm Spencer and I live in a house with lots of my family and my pet snake Patrick. When we went into lockdown because of Covid-19 there was a lot of tension in my house. Gran and Granddad moved in with us which was nice but it made the house too crowded. Some of my family that I live with have underlying health conditions. So everyone was trying hard to stay safe from the virus, even though it could be stressful. Before we went into lockdown I was a carrier of the virus and infected my family. Even after they all recovered, I still felt guilty and blamed myself for it.

During the lockdown my school had remote learning which was a struggle for me with all the noise and the slow internet in the house, it made me miss going to school. At least I had Patrick to keep me company, unlike my siblings who I was constantly arguing and fighting with. Even my friends were distant. I thought I would feel better after the lockdown was lifted but that made me feel even more worried and anxious about getting back into the routine and catching up with school work that I couldn't concentrate on at home. But most importantly, I was scared I would infect my family again.

Diana: Hi I'm Diana and I'm a Youth Advisor on the We're All Right project.

Laura: Hi I'm Laura and I'm also a Youth Advisor on the We're All Right project.

Lindsay: Hello I'm Lindsay and I am the Youth Participation Coordinator on the We're All Right project.

So what we did is we took these stories out to groups of young people and we asked them to help us complete them.

Laura: Mm-hmm, I think it was a really interesting process because I think it really highlighted to us what young people are thinking about when they were able to sort of fill in the gaps. We got to see what young people's priorities are in relation to the pandemic and what they've been thinking about and what's been on their minds.

Diana: And it's quite refreshing seeing their point of view instead of just assuming what they've been through, it's coming out of their own experiences, they seemed very enthusiastic and engaged in the process, like they want to be heard.

Lindsay: I also loved how much fun they had with it. We had a lot of fun doing this. I think people forget that working with young people even when you're talking about difficult stuff is always loads of fun because they have a great time with each other, they use their creativity and they use their imagination and will get into how far their imagination went, especially with this story [laughs].

Laura: Yeah it's always so interesting to see how great young people are at recognising the sensitivity of a topic but also being able to bring light and fun to it. And treating it sensitively but not super seriously so that it kind of drains out any kind of life which is not the case with a lot of people's stories and lot of trauma there's so much life there that needs to be recognised as well as respecting the sensitivity of that situation.

Diana: I feel that that's a great maturity because a lot of people may think that working with young people is just, you know they might not understand, they might not be mature

enough about the topic but really they are the experts. They know what they're talking about, they can handle it no matter the age and their contributions are just as important as an adult's.

Lindsay: Yeah I think people underestimate what young people already know about as well. So what they've been through but also maybe what their friends have been through and what they've supported them through. So this idea that like oh young people don't get it or this is too hard a topic to talk about with young people. I've just never found that to be the case in any of the work that I've done.

Laura: No and we talk about experts by experience and I think it's really important because as adults of course you're able to look back and reflect on your own youth and there are going to be some similarities but the youth of today, the young people of today are having very different experiences. And there's going to be parallels but there's also going to be a lot of things that just weren't happening or were happening to a lesser degree or weren't as recognised when the adults working with them were younger. So really the young people hold the key to really understanding what is going on and it's really important that adults working with them are listening and treating them as experts in their own experiences.

Lindsay: One of the first things we asked the young people to do when we met with them was we asked them to sort of think about a map of support that the young person in this case Spencer, would have had in his life. So we asked them, part of it was about imagining who was in Spencer's life because some of it was sort of based on the story that we brought to them.

Laura: They were extremely creative in this area as well it's worth saying.

Diana: Yeah they loved it.

Laura: They absolutely loved it, it was such a joy to watch them kind of take this story and roll with it and sort of put their stamp on it.

Lindsay: So obviously what we hear about in Spencer's story is his family and how much stress and worry there is around people's health during a pandemic and how much of a strain that actually puts on Spencer as well as a young person and that is something that is very hard for a young person to take that responsibility to think about could I be causing the grave illness or potential death of one of my loved ones, that's an incredibly hard thing to have to deal with.

Laura: And particularly during the pandemic when the people that you lived with, that was kind of your whole world. Like outside of that there wasn't really much escaping from your family if you were a young person, which I'm sure created its own kind of challenges and experiences for young people [laughs].

Lindsay: The other thing that the young people sort of highlighted that they thought was really important was Spencer's relationship with his grandparents. So his grandparents had had to move in with them at the beginning of the pandemic because they were the ones who were quite vulnerable health wise and so they needed to be somewhere where they needed to be somewhere where they could be cared for and they didn't want the household separated. On the one hand that was adding to the overcrowding in the household. But at the same time it was deepening

that relationship that Spencer had with his grandparents and felt like they really grew closer together in that time.

Laura: Yeah it was quite bittersweet I think because there was obviously additional people there for Spencer to talk to and to deepen those connections with but also I mean we were all thinking during the pandemic about the vulnerable people in our lives and I think that may have also added to Spencer's concern about hurting his family.

Lindsay: One of the other ways that we talked about the support that Spencer has and this is where the creativity really got...

Laura: Do we get to talk about Patrick?

Lindsay: Yes it's time to talk about Patrick.

Laura: [Laughs]

Lindsay: Patrick is Spencer's snake.

Laura: Emotional support snake.

Lindsay: Yes. He's not just any snake, he is Spencer's emotional support animal. And they got even closer during the pandemic because Spencer wasn't going to school every day, he was at home with Patrick every day so that sort of support that he was getting from Patrick and the support that Patrick was getting from Spencer intensified at that time so I think it was really nice. I mean it was great, it was fun. And they actually drew a picture.

Diana: Yeah it's so interesting how you would think of people, you know your friends, your family, your teachers, being part of your support system. But an animal? People usually disregard that and the young people that we worked with, they loved it, they just created this whole persona for Patrick, they created a whole back story, it was amazing how they managed to integrate it into the workshop.

Laura: Well it goes to show how important pets are to young people as support. But also again we're talking about fun and these young people were like you know what? This is a really serious story, let's bring in a snake. Like they wanted to have fun with this, they didn't want it to be all doom and gloom. It just goes to show that you just can't have that approach with young people.

Lindsay: Yeah that sort of completely different way of thinking that I never would have come up with a snake as a support pet.

Laura: No.

Lindsay: I might think of a cat because I have cats and I love my cats and I do get support from them. But like the idea that it was a snake.

Diana: Cold blooded.

Lindsay: Yeah this thing that no one thinks is cuddly and warm at all but this is what was so important to Spencer in his life.

- Laura: Yeah absolutely. I mean come on, the pandemic was every pet's dream. We were all struggling but they just liked that we were able to be at home, we were able to fuss over them.
- Diana: Endless attention.
- Laura: Endless attention.
- Lindsay: Yeah and we'll get a bit more into Patrick throughout, you know Patrick is going to be a central figure in this story obviously.
- [Interim Music]
- Lindsay: We have all lived through this pandemic but there are very different experiences when you're a young person living through a pandemic. We needed to recognise that and we needed to acknowledge how difficult it's been for young people to kind of live through that and have their lives upended, and have their friends taken away and all their social life and everything. When you're young that is incredibly hard.
- Laura: Yeah and if you think about the pandemic in relation to your years, if you've gone through two years of that and when the pandemic started you were 14 and then you were 16 then that's a greater percentage of your life than if you were 30 when Covid started and then 32 when things started to kind of die off. It's a greater percentage of your life and realistically more kind of milestones are probably happening at that young age. As well as a feeling of just generally having less power when you're younger and feeling that things are out of your hands.
- Diana: And I think that's a great link to surviving sexual violence as well because even though it was a terrible thing and everyone went through their own hardships I think there's a lot to learn from it, there's a lot of experiences that can be tied in. It's almost a good thing because I feel like people can relate more now and understand a bit more about what it is like to go through trauma.
- Laura: Yeah it's a feeling of loss of agency which was very much something that we were all feeling during the pandemic. We felt like we didn't have any control, all of our rights had been taken away from us and it was being dictated to us what we can and can't do.
- Diana: A lot of the media were constantly blaming the young people for spreading the virus. And not even thinking that the young people have anxiety, they're worried themselves about it. They have loved ones, they have vulnerable people at home.
- Laura: There's a huge parallel with victim blaming there. We blame survivors of sexual violence for the assault or abuse that they've experienced because we try to criticise places where they may have gone wrong or they may have not kept themselves the most safe.
- Diana: And after the pandemic kids are just thrown back into school and especially for someone like Spencer, I feel like he needed to assert new boundaries. Everyone is excited to see each other again but touching, hugging, shaking hands, playing together if you're a younger young person, all of these relationships they're different because everyone's boundaries are not the same anymore. You don't know what anyone is comfortable with.

- Lindsay: The similarities to having experiences of sexual violence, that sort of need to assert new boundaries, the fact that everything has changed and your levels of comfort with hugging, even being close to people, there was so much mirrored in the pandemic with that. The anxiety about people being even near you and all of that sort of fear that comes up that just having people around you. Which may have felt like a totally normal thing before this all happened then becomes this thing that's a huge source of anxiety and fear and you just don't even really know how to deal with it. And the idea that you can just jump back into "normal life" you can't ask people to do that after a situation like that.
- Laura: There was a lot of concern that young people had that the teachers wouldn't take this seriously or that they wouldn't understand. Or the mitigating circumstances wouldn't be taken when it came to Spencer's work and that oftentimes teachers aren't really open to hearing what young people have to say about their home lives. They want the work to be done and there's not particularly any room for I guess excuses would be a word that teachers would use. But there's not really any room for that and there's perhaps a lack of recognition or young people felt that there was a lack of recognition from teachers. So the kind of difficulties that young people are experiencing outside of school.
- Diana: I think a massive issue about reintegration especially back into education after the pandemic and lockdown was that they expect you to return back to normal and it's a different normal, I don't think we can call this normal. It's like there needed to be subjective and personal guidance. There needed to be personal understanding of the individuals that were going through things that didn't allow them to submit their work on time or do as best as they can in terms of quality. And one of the things that young people said was that teachers would just hand out detentions if the work wasn't done and as simple as teachers just asking 'How come you haven't done the homework? Or home come you haven't completed this task?'.
- Laura: Yeah.
- Diana: And trying to offer some sort of personalised support system for them instead of just punishing them.
- Lindsay: I think one of the interesting things as well is that, that was based on young people's experiences in schools before lockdown happened. So this wasn't just because of lockdown, because of the pressure that teachers are under. But the schools that they had experienced had these blanket policies. So these were young people, some of them who had had traumatic experiences prior to the pandemic talking about this. And even in that situation before the pandemic there was a feeling that school really didn't deal well with the kind of behaviours or the ways that people coped after a traumatic experience. And that schools just had these blanket policies that they enforced and they didn't ask.
- Laura: That can be so simple. That can be kind of a ten minute conversation but can provide you with so much clarity about what someone's going through.
- Diana: Yeah and again just to reiterate you don't to have training and you don't need to be a professional on this. You just need to be human and have a bit of empathy. It doesn't take much out of your day to just ask 'Are you OK? Is there anything I can do?'

- Lindsay: And a blanket policy, a one size fits all approach is the opposite of empathy. It is the exact opposite of what any young person who's been through trauma needs in their life.
- Laura: Yeah.
- Lindsay: Because what they need is for their individual circumstances to be taken seriously and believed and responded to in a way that makes them feel like they are not the problem.
- Laura: Yeah well we're talking about the difference between equality and equity. So equality is the idea that you treat everybody the same and equity is recognising that people need unique things depending on their own circumstances. And all the young people are not created equal. You're going to have people from marginalised groups who are dealing with things that more privileged people are not going through. You're going to have people who are young carers. You're going to have people who have gone through different types of trauma like sexual violence that affect their day to day moving through the world. And it's really important that we recognise that there are many different types of young person and even within what we would consider a group of young people there are going to be many different experiences. No two survivors are going to have the same story or need the same thing. And I think that if we view it in this way of oh OK we understand now that survivors need support, and if we don't go any further than that and say 'OK but what does this survivor need?' Then we're not doing the right thing.
- Lindsay: One of the other things that is on our list of what young people said was really important was that someone took care of Patrick once Spencer went back to school. So first it became his grandparents. And then when his grandparents moved out it was another family member who was like, we'll take care of Patrick in the day because part of it is that Spencer was worried, like how is Patrick going to deal?
- Laura: Yeah.
- Lindsay: And it might have been a displaced thing like how am I going to deal with being away from Patrick all day and back in school. But I think what was so interesting to me is that so much of what they talked about was what we would consider practical support. So Patrick was his emotional support animal and so much of his emotional support really came from Patrick even though he didn't talk to Patrick. Maybe he did talk to Patrick about his trauma we don't know.
- Laura: Maybe. Patrick didn't talk back [laughs].
- Lindsay: Exactly [laughs] but I think that's a really important distinction to make because I think a lot of people are terrified and think, I don't know how to talk to someone about trauma. I don't know how to talk to someone about abuse. I don't know how to talk to someone about violence that they've experienced. And therefore I'll do nothing or I'll just be like oh I'm really, really sorry. Or I'll find someone who's a professional and can talk about this with you.
- Laura: Yeah and usually it's a mix of both right. In most situations where someone has undergone trauma, it needs to be that mix of practical support and emotional support. I mean it's great to get therapy, it's great to talk about your feelings but if the actual kind of factors that are causing your distress aren't addressed and resolved

then you're just going to be in therapy forever on an endless cycle of talking about how you feel. And similarly if you have the practical support but you don't have somebody then to talk through that with and you don't have somebody to really digest what your experience was then you may be stuck with those feelings for a really, really long time, even though your situation, the dynamics of your situation are better.

[Interim Music]

Diana: Another thing that the young people came up with when thinking about what sort of support Spencer could have was focussing on his social life so his friends. They said that his friends would just be able to check in on him, he's be able to get back into a normal relationship with them. And be able to have just simple conversations with them. It's the same with sexual abuse victims, they don't need to constantly have conversations, deep and detailed about their trauma. It's just what did you have for tea yesterday? Anything good?

Lindsay: [Laughs] Yeah.

Laura: These conversations that we really get to have with our friends are so important because you can have a really deep conversation one day and the next day you can kind of be making light and joking about the same thing and I think that's how a long young people operate. I know that I like to joke at my own pain and it's how we move through. It doesn't all have to be, let's sit down and dissect every part of this experience and see how it makes us feel. I think the good thing about having friends is that it can be a therapy session or it can be a comedy show. And it's important to have that mix of both.

Diana: Yeah that kind of supportive dynamic but also its adaptable.

Laura: You don't want to be just surrounded by people who treat you like a fragile broken baby bird who just can't do anything. Who needs to be kind of wrapped in bubble wrap and can never have a normal human experience again.

Diana: You want them to wrap you in bubble wrap and then start popping the little bubbles.

Laura: Yeah [laughs]

Lindsay: [Laughs] Yeah and working with groups of young people where they had gotten support from each other prior to the pandemic and then suddenly they weren't able to meet anymore, they weren't able to be there to support each other anymore. The loss of any kind of aspect of social life when you're a young person is a really big deal. But when you're a young person who has experienced trauma and is getting support from your peers in a setting like that and that's taken away, that is a huge, huge loss that we need to recognise and find any way we can to support young people to gain those back.

Diana: The thing is I feel like a lot of adults and even maybe young people as well, they don't realise that they have a right to have fun. You know it's not all about your professional or your academic life. Your support system is beyond your school life and your home life. You've got your friends, in the case of bringing it back to Spencer's story, Spencer is very disconnected from his friends and it was partially because of the pandemic but then afterwards it was a lot of anxiety because of his



home life, because he had vulnerable people in the house. And I feel like people disregarded that when we came back from the pandemic. That it was important to focus on these interpersonal relationships that we were disconnected from for such a long time.

Laura: Yeah what we're still talking about is young people who are having to deal with something really grown up and having to sort of be mature beyond their years to deal with what is going on. Young people are supposed to be able to have fun and not have these, huge, huge worries sitting on their shoulders. And I think the pandemic really took that away from a lot of young people. And that is also taken away from people who have experienced sexual violence.

Lindsay: I think that one of the things that was at the heart of wanting to really focus on Article 39 when we started doing this work was that we could see that it was a right that was going to need to be applied to so many young people. Because before maybe it's considered, you know the way that it's framed, the language of it is very much sounds like people who are victims of war or natural disasters or these things that seem like huge newsworthy events.

Laura: The things that we think of when we think of the word trauma.

Lindsay: Yeah.

Laura: Realistically, that's kind of the acceptable view of what trauma is.

Lindsay: Yeah but what really we thought is wait a minute, I mean so much of what young people are experiencing right now is really traumatic. You can downplay it as much as you want but what's so important at that time of life is the access to your social life isn't it? And the fact that says specifically in that article that you have a right to a social life after and experience of trauma.

Laura: And even if you were legally allowed to go see your friends, the press was still shaming young people who were doing what was perfectly legal, who were going to see their friends. Even if they were doing so safely, there was again this victim blaming of you shouldn't be doing that. When that is their right. It is their right and it's a way that young people were recovering was kind of making their way back into their own social lives.

Diana: Yeah and you shouldn't feel guilty about having these rights and taking them.

Lindsay: But you need to know that they exist right? You need to know that they exist and other people need to know that they exist. You can only guilt someone for claiming their rights when you don't understand that it's a right.

Laura: Yeah [laughs].

Lindsay: You know? Because otherwise you think that it's a privilege.

Laura: Yeah absolutely.

Lindsay: And it's not.

Laura: No it's not.

- Lindsay: Yeah so one of the things that struck me about every interaction we had with young people is how little young people are informed about their rights. Across the board. I mean we brought them the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and shared that with them and so many times I saw them reading through it and excitedly going 'I didn't know I had this right'.
- Laura: Yeah I was just kind of repeating saying 'Do you know this?' to everyone we came across and the answer being no. And then us having to say, well you should. It's not your fault that you don't but you should know this. The people in your life, the adults in your life, it is their responsibility that you do know this is one of your rights, that you know your rights. And they're kind of mind is being blown by that, this really simple fact.
- Diana: Yeah there's such a big imbalance and deficit between responsibilities and rights and young people throughout the pandemic. And relating it back to sexual abuse and violence. They feel like they have so much responsibility and a lot of people put responsibility upon them for the events that took place but they aren't told their rights. They're not given their rights. They don't claim their rights because they don't know them. There's not enough education. There's not enough awareness about it.
- Laura: Yeah absolutely. And I feel like something that is really important to mention is that if you don't know your rights it can be really hard to know when they've been violated. And this is why young people who have experienced sexual violence can take a really long time to realise that that is what they experienced. We kind of see time and again people brushing off their experiences, it's not been that serious. Or not being a real instance of sexual violence. Not being legitimate. But actually if young people were to know and understand their rights perhaps they'd feel more confident in saying 'Well no, I know that my right was violated, I know that I have a right to safety. And that wasn't upheld.'.
- Diana: And there's also the fear that the consequences if they do come forward with what they've experienced, the consequences would be negative. They might not necessarily know that they have the right to confidentiality. And I know that young people are scared to tell teachers or to reach out to professionals because they think parents will get involved and everyone will know and then their peers will find out when really they don't want it to be anyone else's business because it is such a sensitive matter. Also rights such as the fact that they can access support, that they don't have to just go to the police.
- Laura: Yeah.
- Diana: You can avoid going to the police and taking a legal route, you can just get support.
- Laura: Yeah there's definitely a fear of if I tell somebody what happened to me I'm going to be pushed into going down this specific path and usually that is kind of you know if you're even taken seriously to begin with, usually it will be, well you have to go to the police. And again if that agency is taken away from you, you've just gone through a situation where your rights haven't been upheld, your agency has been taken away and now that same thing is happening all over again when you're in an even more vulnerable position. And you're being told this is what you should do when that may go against what you need to do in that moment.

- Lindsay: Yeah one of the things it's making me think about is just the fact that knowing about your rights, knowing that you have rights as a young person you hold rights is probably in a lot of ways the only time that a young person might feel like 'Oh I actually maybe have some control over my life'.
- Laura: And feel empowered.
- Lindsay: Yeah because there's so many situations where young people are just told what to do. They're punished for not doing what someone told them to do.
- Laura: They're spoken down to.
- Lindsay: They're spoken down to. They're belittled. They're made to feel like you don't question the authority of anyone. And what does that mirror exactly? It mirrors sexual violence doesn't it? [laughs]
- Laura: Yeah [laughs] yeah.
- Lindsay: So we have to understand how the lack of consent anyone ever asks for them for most of the things that happen in their lives when you're young, when you're under 18 generally, when you're in school, you know parents as well. All of these things if young people never have a sense that they can say no, or that they can question things. Or they can say 'Actually this isn't what I want'.
- Laura: Yeah. If you're learning them after the fact. If you're learning them when you've undergone that trauma. When you have so many more things to think about, your brain probably isn't in the best place. If then you're trying to figure out what you're entitled to, what rights you're entitled to, how you can assert your boundaries. How you can exercise your rights. It's just not the best time to be dealing with all of that new information. These things need to be taught preventatively. Young people need to be armed with them before they do go through trauma. That's really, really important.
- Diana: And that's where social responsibility comes in. Because it's not necessarily standing in front of a classroom and just going, OK now we're going to learn all a thousand rights that you have. It's just simple things like in situations saying 'Well OK these are your options' just laying out the options on the table and saying 'You have these rights, you can choose and it is completely up to you and it's your decision and you have these rights' but again it's the issue of why do other people know what's best for you when it's you that went through this experience not them.
- Laura: I think the best thing that you can do if somebody tells you their story is to say 'I'm sorry that happened. Thank you for telling me. What do you need from me?' That question of what do you need, there's so much power in that. It asks the young person exactly what they require in this moment. It recognises that they're still going through something, really, really emotionally deep and potentially damaging, and it gives them agency.
- Lindsay: What happens is that people assume, unless they have heard directly from someone that there are no survivors around them.
- Laura: Yeah. And we know that the vast majority of cases are unreported. We know that young people and anyone are very unlikely to tell their stories for a number of

reasons. So if we're assuming that the people around us have undergone some form of trauma, that doesn't have to be sexual violence, that doesn't have to be the trauma of the pandemic. If we recognise that we're all different human beings with different experiences and that the likelihood is we've gone through something that has maybe slightly damaged us or slightly made us a bit more vulnerable then we can have more empathy, be kinder and create a better world for everybody.

[Outro Music]

Diana: That was like a click moment!

Lindsay: It felt like yeah I definitely wanted to do that. (laughs)

Laura: You've been listening to the We're All Right podcast brought to you by the Association for Young People's Health. For more information on this project and the work that we're doing, go to [ayph.org.uk](https://ayph.org.uk) thanks for listening.

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