Notes:

Mortal Fools is a multi award-winning theatre, drama and creative learning company based in North East England, specialising in co-creation with children and young people.

Notes:

We use the process of co-creating theatre and other performance-based art (like film, animation and audio) with children and young people, as a way to improve and enhance their mental health and wellbeing.

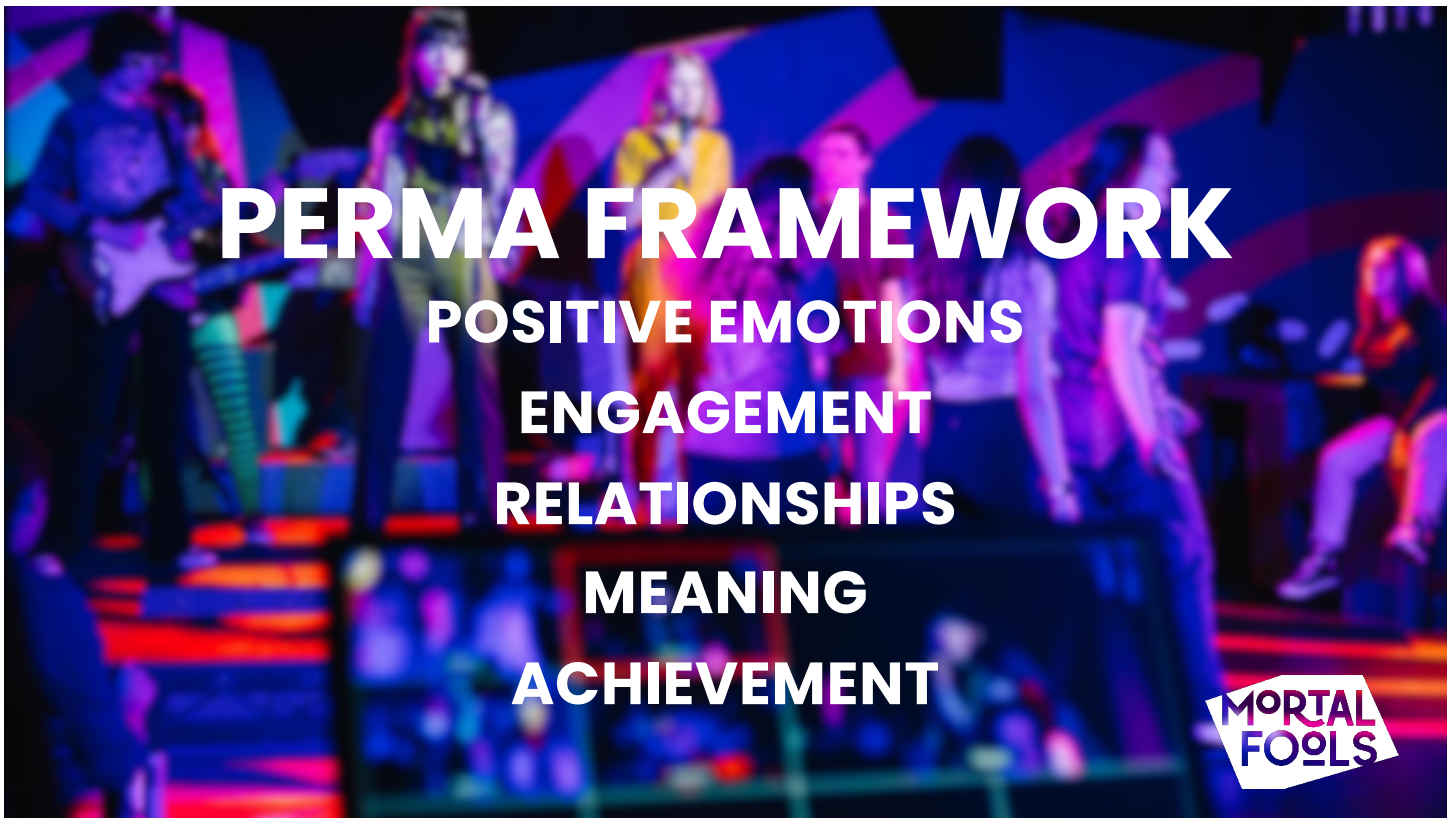
We have a range of live and digital programmes, which are all delivered using a methodology that combines an artistic, co-creation approach to making original pieces of work, with a relational approach that creates safe, supportive and healthy creative environments.

Today, I'm going to share with you a few examples of how those programmes are effective for early intervention and prevention of mental health challenges, together with enacting the long-term aim of reducing numbers of children and young people referred into statutory services.

Notes:

I'm going to start by talking about the wellbeing framework we use to inform all areas of our work.

We apply Dr Martin Seligman's PERMA™™ Framework for mental wellbeing to how we plan, deliver, review and evaluate all our activities.



Notes:

PERMA™ is an acronym for five building blocks for mental wellbeing – Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement – which overlap nicely with the NHS 5 Steps for Mental Wellbeing.

This ratified framework, from the field of positive psychology, gives us a clear structure to apply in our work with young people – creating a delivery practice which tangibly increases the presence of the five wellbeing building blocks.

To support this, we have developed a comprehensive *Wellbeing Practice Guide and Toolkit*, which focuses on how to use the PERMA™ Framework in an applied context with young people and collect data to prove outcomes and impact. This Toolkit is currently being tested in four partnerships – I don't have time to go into that FULL Toolkit today, but if anyone is interested in knowing more, feel free to contact us after this event.

What I will talk through is a brief summary of what the five building blocks of the PERMA™ Framework might look like in a co-creation setting:

Notes:

Positive Emotions – this is all about us feeling good. It might include feeling good about the present and what is happening right now (for example, having fun and enjoying doing an activity), feeling good about the past and what has happened before (for example, feeling proud of myself or others) and feeling good about the future and what is to come (for example, optimism and excitement about an upcoming performance or event)

Notes:

Engagement – this is when someone is using their skills, personal strengths and full attention to work on a task which is at least a little challenging for them. We often talk about combining a high level of challenge with a high level of support in our work – which leads me nicely onto the next building block…

Notes:

Relationships – these are fundamental to wellbeing, and the impact of the other four building blocks is often amplified through experiencing them *with others* for example, having fun together, working through a challenge together or achieving something together.

We also apply this structure to how our staff relate to the young people, and how we are all cultivating positive relationships with one another.

Notes:

Meaning is the feeling of belonging, that we matter and what we're doing matters, that we are taking part in something that is bigger than our individual selves but that has personal relevance to us.

Our co-creation approach means that young people's experiences and voices are central to creating all our artistic work – and the final products. The work presents the reality of young people's lives, using their voices and giving a platform for sharing with wider audiences, including other young people.

Notes:

Achievement is the feeling of accomplishing something, of experiencing success – and this is different for different people. For example, one young person may feel huge accomplishment by simply coming to sessions, someone else from contributing their ideas and another from mastering a tricky movement sequence. Experiencing achievement is a fundamental factor in young people feeling compelled to continue working through challenges and to grow and learn.

Notes:

Everyone in this room will be well aware that there is no “quick fix” for mental health and wellbeing – so we can’t claim that our work “fixes” anything.

We want our work to make a positive contribution to the lives of the young people who take part in our activities – so we put our energy into improving our delivery practice – the practical way we work with beneficiaries – so it maximises the positive impact we have in the time we have with them.

We plan our activities with these building blocks in mind – and the focus can shift from session to session depending on what we’ve identified in the needs of the group. For example, early on in a process, we may be focusing more on them having a great time (positive emotion) and building bonds with other group members (relationships), whereas towards the end of a project, we might be focusing more on helping them feel achievement and meaning.

We can prove through the data we generate via our PERMA™ Toolkit, together with testimonials from young people and their trusted adults, that our work does increase the presence of the wellbeing building blocks in their lives, and that this has multiple positive outcomes for young people – and that the longer they are with us, the deeper and more long lasting that positive impact is.

With that context of PERMA™ covered, I’ll now talk you through three examples of our programmes of work for young people.

Notes:

The first is our Melva Digital Programme – which is a chargeable web-based creative programme, available as annual licenses and designed to be led by teaching staff in schools.

Of all our programmes, Melva is the most explicitly about mental health and wellbeing themes.

It's aimed at children in Key Stage 2, and takes them through a fun and creative story-based programme which is designed to help them better understand and manage their worries and anxiety – or worrits, as they're called Melva's world.

Notes:

The Melva programme consists of two stories about Melva Mapletree, an almost-11-year-old who struggles with her worrits, and these two stories are told through two different artistic mediums.

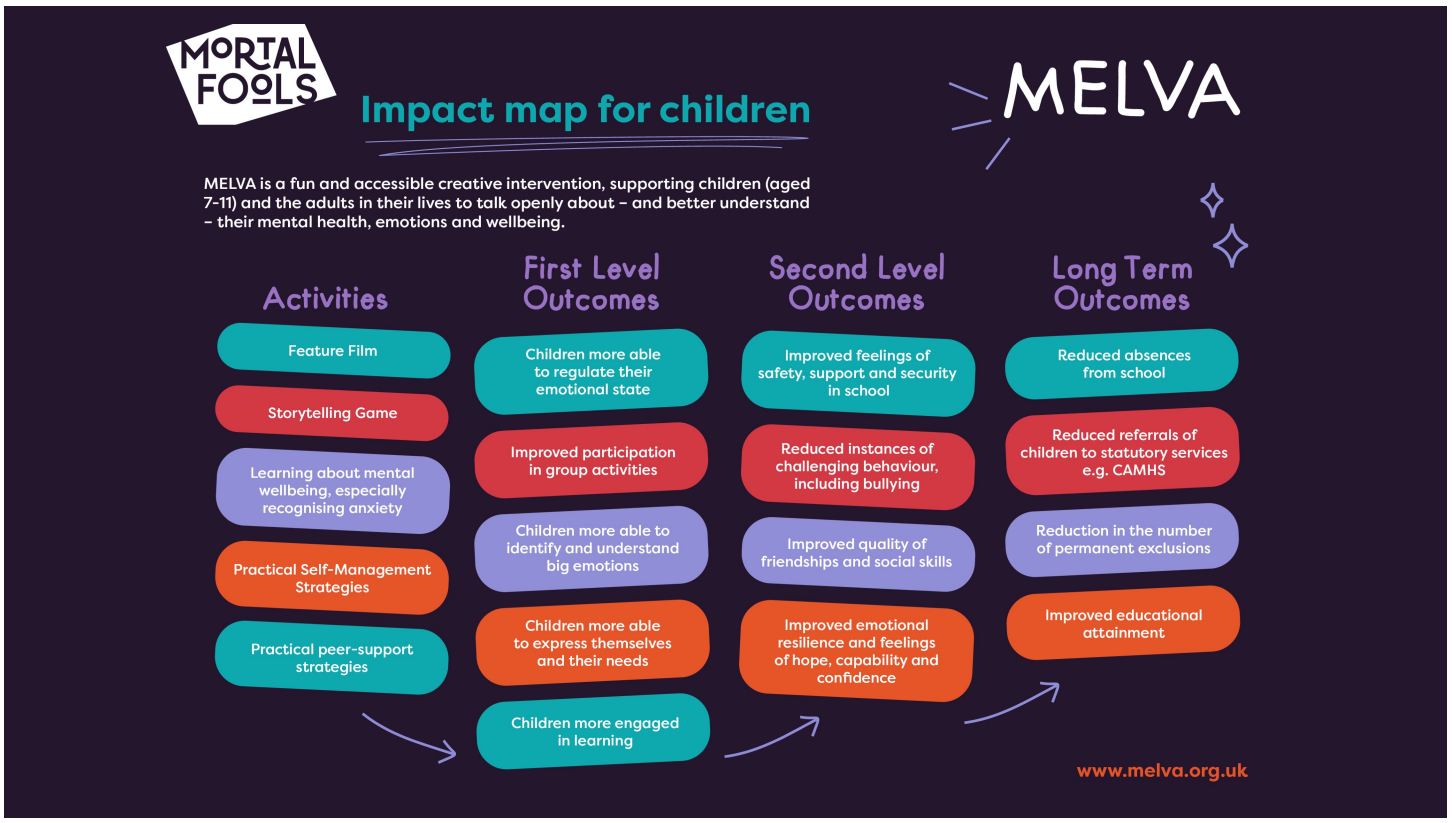
The first is a feature film recording of a live theatre production. It is split into episodes to make it manageable within school lesson slots, and to give space for children and teachers to consider the issues raised in the story, apply it to their own lives and learn techniques for self-management of their worrits – before they become a significant problem.

Notes:

The second is a web-based, choose-your-own-adventure style game, where children are in the driving seat of making decisions for the characters throughout the story. The game also focuses on how young people can recognise mental health struggles in others, and ways they can support their peers.

The Melva Digital programme has also been used by families at home and in intervention groups in other young people's settings, including a current partnership with another charity, Children North East, where we are testing Melva Digital as an intervention model for children identified as at risk of self-harming behaviours.

In all cases, we use the process of children taking part in the creative stories and activities in the Melva Programme as a structured, fun way for them to consider how worrits show up in their own lives and what they can do about them.



Notes:

This is the Impact Map showing how Melva Digital Activities lead to longer-term outcomes. I'll give you a minute to have a quick look at this.

With these preventative tools, children can become more able to regulate their emotional state and express their needs before they reach crisis point, which in turn can lead to reduced instances of challenging behaviour and improved feelings of safety, and in the long-term, reduced absences or exclusions from schools, and reduced referrals to statutory services.

In summary, Melva provides children and adults in their lives with child-friendly, accessible language to talk about mental wellbeing and their emotions, along with teaching practical self-management techniques.

Notes:

This is a snapshot of some of the feedback we've had from participants and teachers about Melva's impact: *See quotes*

Notes:

Melva hits our PERMA™ objectives in a whole host of ways – in both its themes and its delivery. Its fun and creative nature is vital for Positive Emotion and Engagement – and neuroscience is clear that learning happens more quickly and more effectively when we're having fun.

It is designed to encourage group discussion, sharing and decision-making, supporting development of positive relationships. Because Melva was developed in consultation with children, they can see their own worries and anxieties represented in the characters and story, making it relevant and meaningful to their lives.

Because of the mental health crisis we're in, many people who are not mental health professionals (for example teachers) are being looked to to support children with their mental health. For someone in this position, there is often a huge amount of anxiety about doing this - worrying that by having these conversations, you'll open up a can of worms that you don't know how to manage well.

Teacher CPD is part of the Melva Digital programme offer, with the programme itself providing a structured, safe and (critically) a fun way to facilitate these conversations, and give teachers and children preventative self-management tools.

Because it's a digital programme, it can be widely distributed – and we're in discussion with commissioners in the Northeast exploring ways to make Melva available to schools at scale.

Notes:

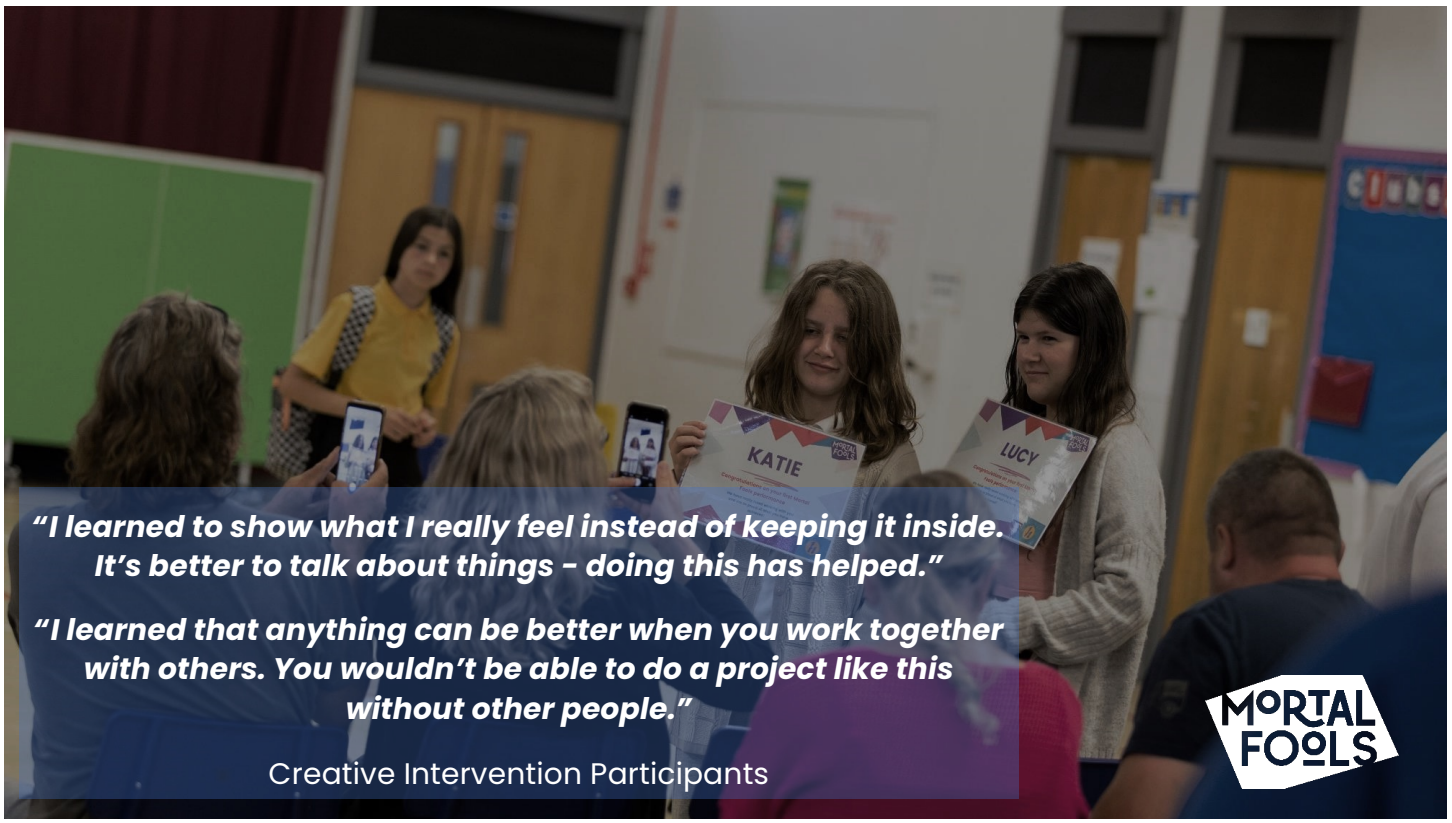
The second programme I'd like to highlight is a simple one – a 12-week Creative Intervention Model delivered in secondary schools. This programme is currently financed by private trusts and foundations, including Children in Need – making it free of charge to schools, currently limited to the North East.

For this programme, up to 15 young people are referred into the programme by school staff each term.

For 2 hours per week, over the course of 12 weeks, they take part in a range of creative activities designed to improve their social and emotional skills, confidence and give them a voice through making some form of creative output – like a short animation or audio piece – using their ideas and words about a subject which is important to them.

The referral model is an extremely important dynamic in this programme as it prioritises young people at risk of self-harming behaviours, with mental health or behavioural challenges and supports them to work towards altering the negative pathway they are on.

At the end of each term, we arrange a showcase event where they present their creative output to a small, invited audience, usually made up of teachers and their peers. We provide simple lighting and technical support, so they really feel their work is valued and of high-artistic quality, and they also complete an Explore Arts Award – which is an entry level qualification – giving them a tangible achievement for their work.



"I learned to show what I really feel instead of keeping it inside. It's better to talk about things - doing this has helped."

"I learned that anything can be better when you work together with others. You wouldn't be able to do a project like this without other people."

Creative Intervention Participants

Notes:

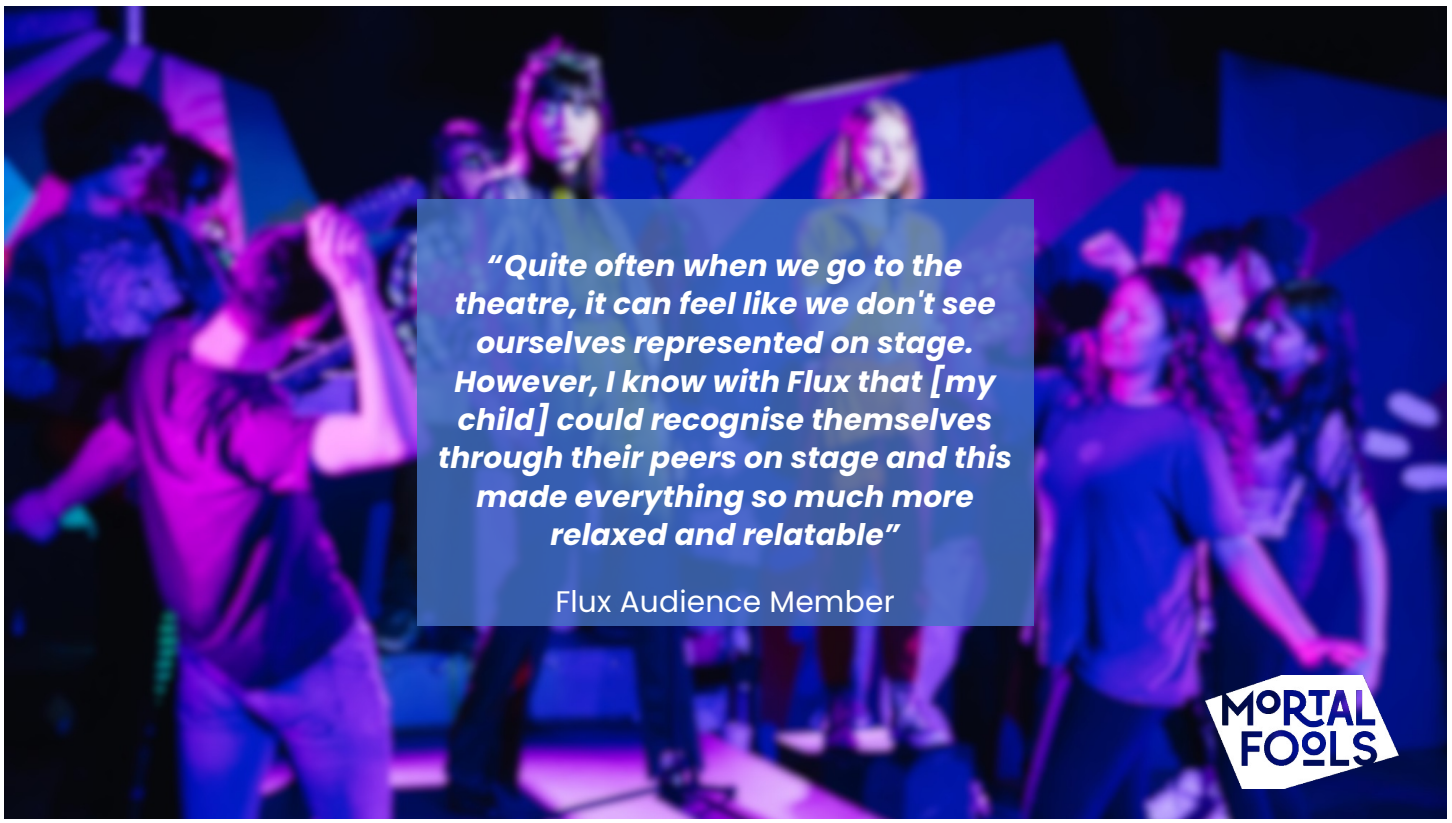
These quotes provide a snapshot of some of the reflections made by young people from our most recent cohort, about the positive learning they took from participating: *See quote*

Notes:
The final young people's programme I'll tell you about today is our Youth Theatre. This is an open-access and free of charge programme for children and young people aged 7-19.

Notes:
There are two major performance projects every year, where the multiple groups work alongside professional artists to co-create theatre, film, animation or audio using themes and ideas generated by the young people.

Notes:
A recent project example from our oldest group – the Ensemble Young Company – is FLUX, a theatre piece that explores what it means to question our identity in a world that feels determined to put you into a box. The show was made over 3 months by 12 teenagers from Northumberland, before touring to some of our partners in Burnley and Ellesmere Port.

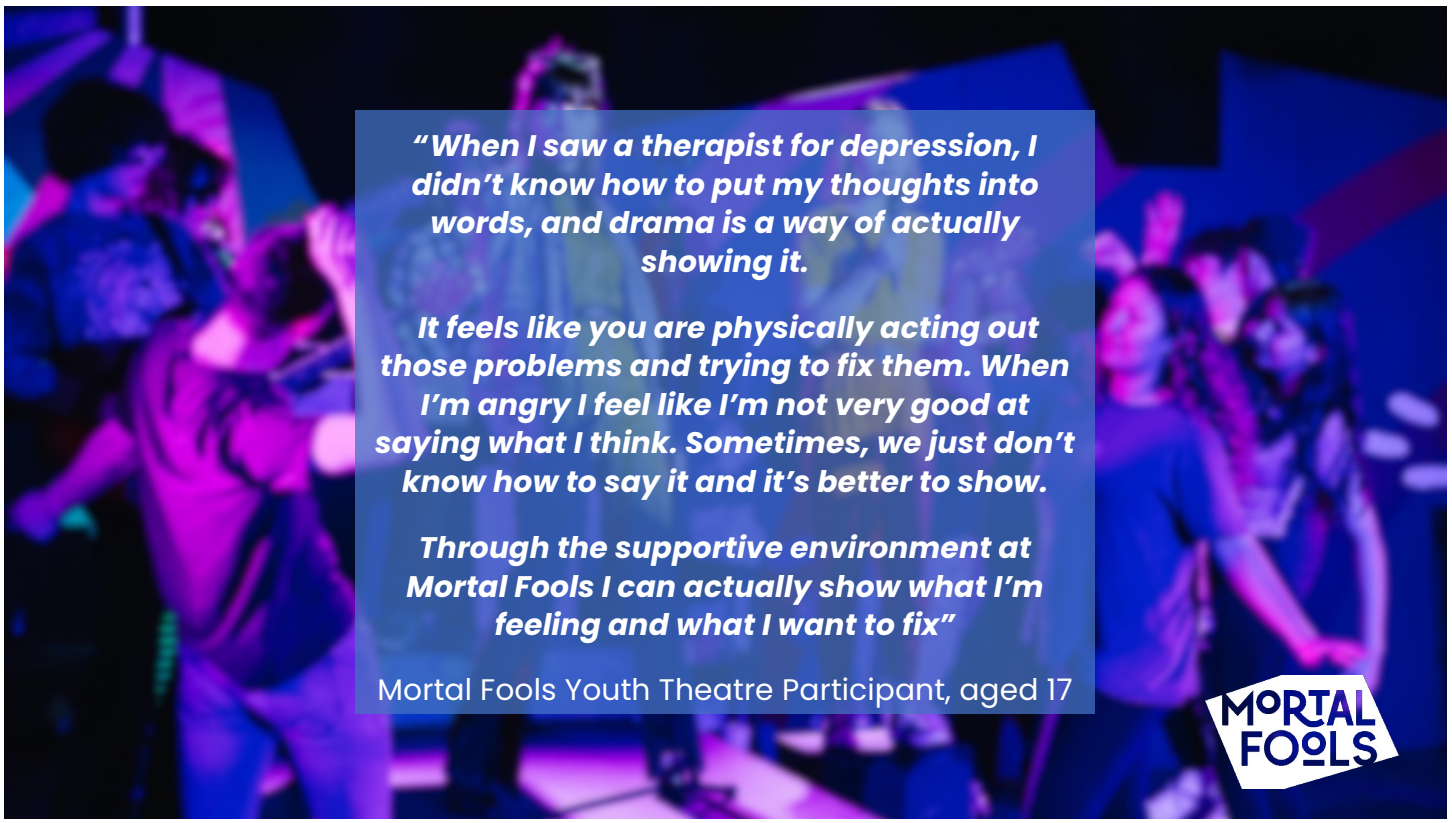
The work our Youth Theatre create is designed for young audiences, as well as general audiences, and we know that seeing your own experiences reflected on the stage can be almost as powerful as taking part in making the work.



Notes:

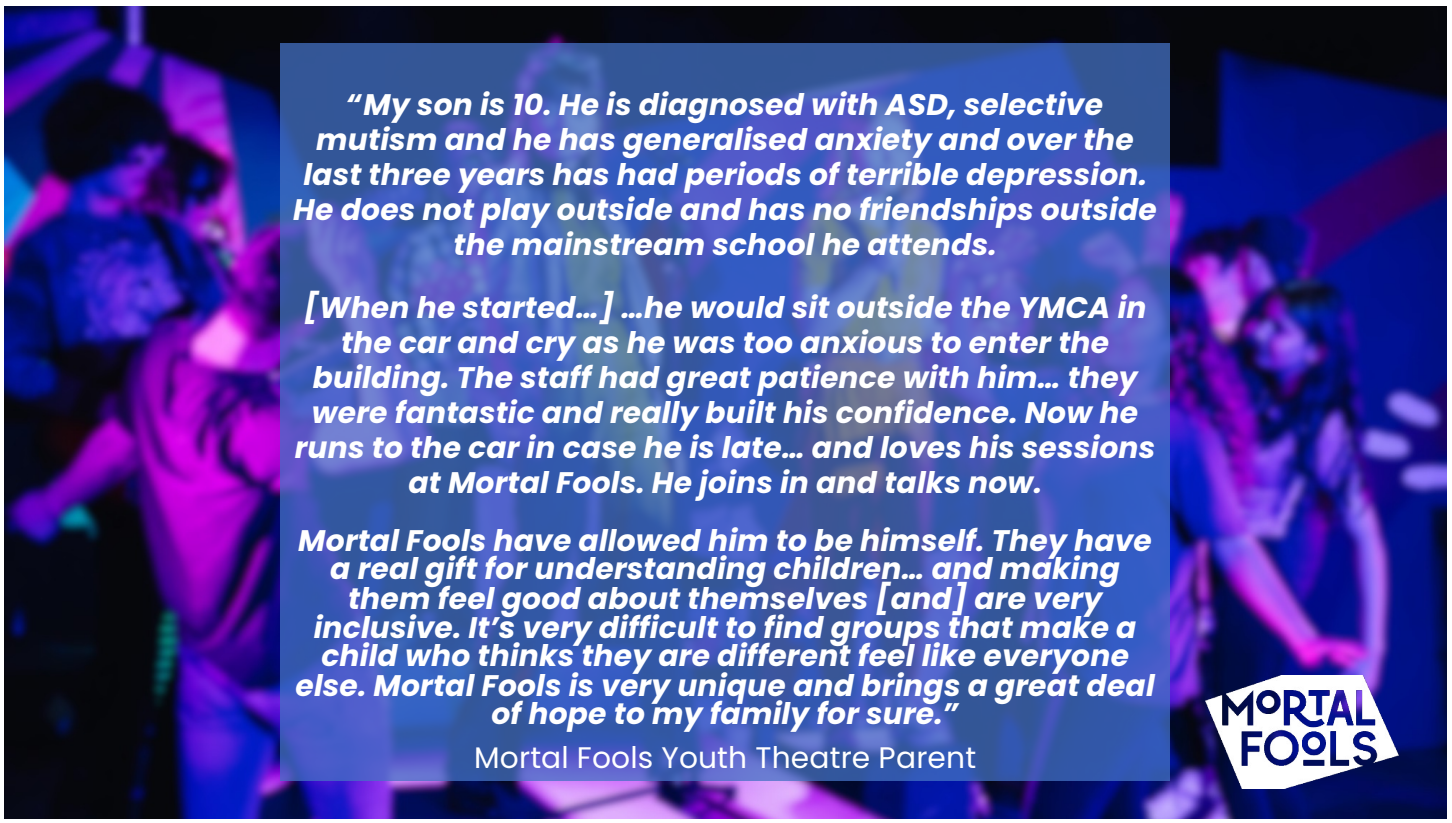
The young people we work with in our youth theatre are usually the individuals we have the most long-standing and deep beneficiary relationships with, and the following quotes capture some of the impact we've talked about for both participants and audiences:

Firstly, this quote from a recent Flux Audience Member who attended with their child: *See quote*



Notes:

Secondly, this quote from a youth theatre member who worked with us for many years, both pre- and post-pandemic: *See quote*



Notes:

And lastly, from a parent of a youth theatre member who joined us about this time last year: *See quote*

Notes:

Before I finish up, there is one final strand of our work that I'd like to mention, which is actually a programme in which we work with adults, rather children and young people.

CONNECT is a training and development programme for organisations, teams and individuals which combines practice from the creative sector with theory and research from the social sciences.

The reason I mention it here, in this context, is that we strongly believe that to be in the best position to support our beneficiaries, it's vital that we as adults take responsibility for looking after our own mental health, and CONNECT is a programme through which we help people to do that.

More recently, we've developed specific training topics that are more directly linked to mental health and wellbeing. For example, our Reslience in Uncertainty & Preventing Burnout session, which is now integrated into the Melva Digital Programme.

Notes:
And finally, I'd like to share with you a short animation that we created with our youth theatre group for 7-11 year olds in Ashington, Northumberland.

This was created over the course of 10 weeks as part of a taster-term in Spring 2022, and it was the first time we had run any activity with young people of this age in this area.

The young people wrote and spoke the words, and we helped bring it to life in this soundscape and animation, and I'm pleased to say that the majority of these young people have now been working with us for just over a year, and have performed in 2 live performance events to public audiences since creating this.

Notes:

I really hope you've found this presentation of interest.

If you'd like to know more about our work, please get in touch.

Thank you for listening.