

ENCOURAGING THE youngsters of Dundee to channel their energy into something positive isn't always an easy task . . .

But thanks to The Attic Youth Project and national charity Project Scotland, children and teenagers are getting the chance to make a difference.

Members from the Dundee project spoke to **Lisa Trainer** about why this has become a success story.

HOW DO you convert a potentially destructive child into someone who cares about his or her future? There's no easy answer, but the work of The Attic Youth project is going some way towards solving the problem.

"We're aiming for a Crackerjack and Saturday morning cinema feel," says Bruce White, project leader at The Attic, in reference to what the children can expect.

"We have songs and games, pantomimes and role play — it's all aimed at releasing energy in a positive way. It's very interactive and we have different themes running through the activities to encourage positive messages."

The Attic Project is based at Elim Church, on Dudhope Crescent Road, and although a Christian charity it has an open door policy. "The Attic is a Christian organisation, but it's not aimed at kids who go to church. We work from a Christian values basis but incorporate that into various games.

"By telling stories we can incorporate issues such as bullying to make the kids think about their actions."

Incentives are also in place for good behaviour during the group sessions, which are weekly on a Monday night for kids from the age of five to 12, as well as a Clanz group for the teenagers who meet every Wednesday.

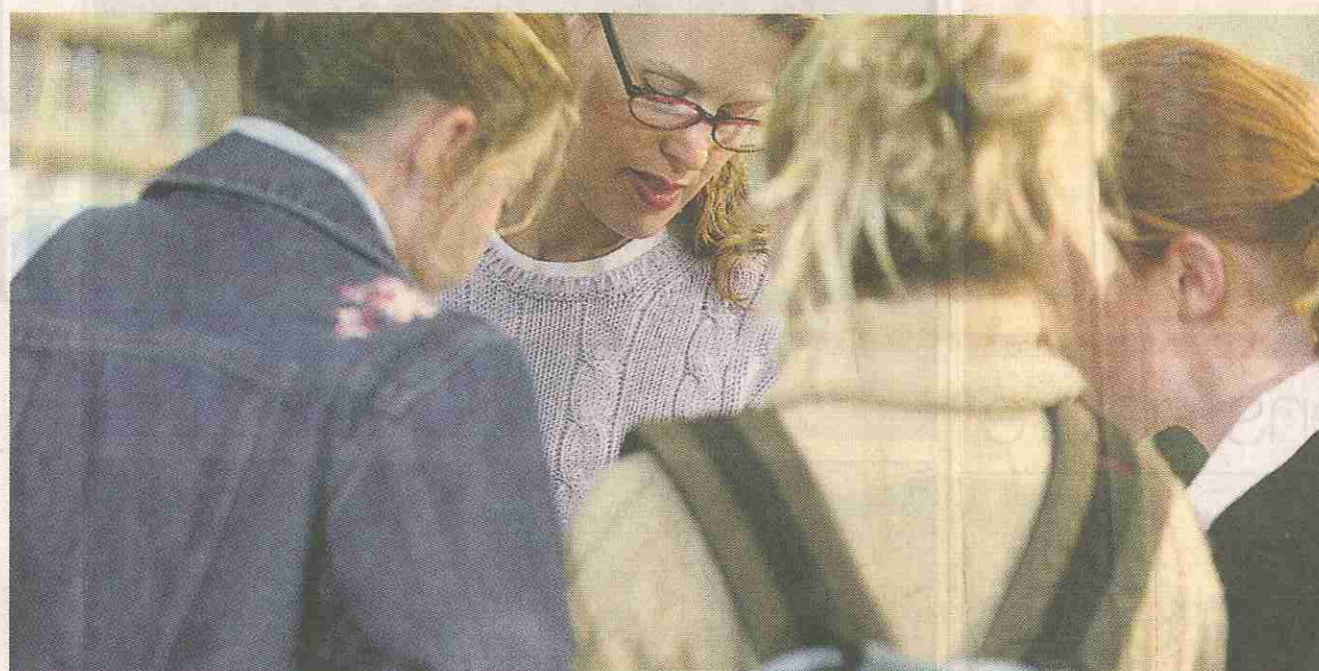
The best-behaved girl and boy each session are added to a chart which then allows them a trip at the end of the term.

"Some of the kids have ADD or ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) which leads to problems at school. We try to make all the activities enjoyable and let them have as much fun as possible.

"We have around 60 to 70 children who regularly attend and we hire buses to collect them from various locations around Dundee — including Menzieshill, Charleston, Lochee, Fintry, wherever needed."

Bruce ensures the attendance amongst the young people stays as high as possible by paying home visits once a week to every child who participates in The Attic.

"It's not just about helping the kids, it's offering support to the families, too. One parent visits our project and she is deaf and blind. We've all learned touch sign language to communicate with her to



Positive message

ensure she's less isolated, which has been a help to her daughter who visits our weekly youth group."

The Attic Youth Group recently won the Dundee Partnership Community Award under the category of Building Stronger Communities. And in partnership with Project Scotland, which acts as an umbrella organisation that match-makes volunteers to charity work placements, the Dundee youth group has recruited three full-time volunteers.

The work of the Dundee project has come full circle with these volunteers as they all attended the group as children.

"The Attic is my family" says Kirsty Campbell, aged 17. With that short but poignant statement Kirsty sums up why it is vital to have a scheme like The Attic Youth Project in Dundee.

"None of my family are in Dundee," explains Kirsty. "So the Attic has become my family and I see Bruce as like a life mentor."

There is no doubt in Kirsty's mind that if the group had not been there offering

her support then her life would have taken a different path.

"I started coming along to the project from the age of seven. I used to cause a bit of trouble — smashing windows and generally doing things I shouldn't. Bruce visited me and was telling me to get away from it all. It wasn't until I went to high school at the age of 12 that I started behaving.

"The Attic has been a guide in my upbringing. I've moved around a lot, but I've always kept in touch with Bruce. I lived in Shetland for six months after I left school at 15. I came back last year as I missed my friends and The Attic.

"Now I have this placement through Project Scotland and I'm able to have my own flat. Working with The Attic is my dream job. I get a great sense of achievement from organising events and helping those from troubled families.

"I want to be 'A Bruce' to the youngsters — be a friend."

Her fellow volunteers, Steven and Garry Griffin — brothers who have attended The

Attic for over a decade, share these sentiments.

"It's great to be building relationships with people who attend; it's rewarding," says Steven (19). "We've also learned deaf blind sign language which has been absolutely brilliant. We draw on the hand of a lady whose daughter attends the project and we're able to have a good laugh with her."

Garry has found volunteering with the group to be a huge confidence builder.

"Talking in front of people here has given me the most confidence I've ever felt," says Garry (20), who assists those giving the main presentations to the youngsters. "I'd like to aim to do a talk by myself in the near future. And it's great working with Kirsty and my brother as volunteers as we've all been coming along here for years and grown up together.

"This project has helped me realise my potential and Bruce has kept in constant contact with me and helped me a lot with things."

Garry and Steven, along with project leader Bruce, are also part of a band called The Bru who recorded their first CD recently. "I get a real buzz from being in the band," says Steven. "We've had two gigs so far and we practise in the main church hall."

Sustaining successful relationships with all the young children, teenagers and volunteers is clearly vital in the work that Bruce and other youth workers face. He has assistance from volunteer mentor, Garry Griffiths, who used to be a research scientist.

"I got in touch with Project Scotland and they matched me with the youth group here," says Gary. "This project is great and very inspiring. This whole organisation is really good and yet it wasn't something I was aware of before.

"My main role here is to assist the three volunteers and help them figure out what they'd like to be. I'm helping to expand their experiences and give them more skills that can be used later in life.

"Some of them have had a tough time and their learning to find their way. My relationship is really good with Kirsty, Garry and Steven and I help them set up goals for their future development."

Through this voluntary work, Gary has decided to have a permanent career change and will study teacher training later this year.

The Attic Youth Project isn't just having a positive influence on the children; it also has a huge impact on the adults who are involved.

"You see people differently through this project and it really opens your eyes," states Gary.

"People can be negative about teenagers or an area of a city. Yet there's lots going on under the surface and you witness people giving up their time to help other people. There's no reason why people like Garry, Steven and Kirsty have to be here doing this, and yet they put a huge amount of time and energy into it.

"In life, everyone needs a bit of encouragement and support."

For more information on Project Scotland and volunteering roles visit www.projectsotland.co.uk