Waves for Change (W4C) fuses the rush of surfing with evidence-based mind/body therapy to provide a child-friendly mental health service to under-served children and young people in South Africa. Through access to safe spaces, caring and consistent mentors, and provision of weekly surf therapy sessions, W4C gives children skills to cope with stress, regulate behaviour, build healing relationships and make positive life choices.
Every year at Waves for Change is special. But 2019 feels like a watershed year in many ways. From our humble beginnings we've been fortunate to build a passionate, highly capable and committed team. This year feels like the year we took our big leap forwards. As a result of our research and improved training and coach support, our programmes are now more inclusive than ever. As we've learnt, so we've shared. By open sourcing what we know, we've helped youth organisations around the world launch their own surf therapy programmes. We're also sharing our work with organisations using other types of activity to engage at-risk populations. 2019 has taught us the power of collaboration. It's the harder way, but in our sector we believe it's the only way.

I hope you enjoy this report and see the passion we have for our work. If you like it, please share it. It's a simple act, but often so powerful. Some of our biggest supporters were passed an annual report by a friend and got in touch.

We are thankful to everyone who gives their energy and time to Waves for Change. Without you we simply wouldn't be here.

- Tim Conibear, W4C Founding Director

A highlight of 2019 was the growth of our surf therapy programme both locally and internationally, specifically making it more inclusive to those who are often left out (e.g. differently-abled children). Another highlight was our increased community participation to deliver a service embedded in the communities we work with. Alongside this, we have formalised and strengthened our safeguarding and child protection team, and this now forms an integral part of the work we do.

- Apish Tshetsha, W4C Co-founder
More than surfing...

Why surfing?

Surfing is the vehicle we use at W4C, to deliver our theory-based mental health service. Surf therapy provides an opportunity for children to participate in an activity that they describe as ‘cool and fun’, and that gives them the aspirational identity of a ‘surfer’ within their community. Children do not require any beach or swimming skills/experience to participate fully. Historically and culturally, under Apartheid, black, indigenous people of colour (BIPOC) were not represented in surf and beach communities, therefore surfing also represents an opportunity for children to be introduced to healing power of the ocean.

Surfing is a difficult, physical, individual activity. It inherently demands focus and induces flow states, which in turn allows respite for participants from negative thoughts and emotions; increases mastery/competency, autonomy, and practical use of emotional and behavioural regulation skills

Surf therapy is facilitated in a group setting. It provides opportunities to build social connections and positive group identities. It also allows us to be cost effective, enabling groups of up to 60 children to participate at one time, whilst maintaining safe surf mentor to child ratios

Coupled with an evidence-based mental health curriculum, the W4C curriculum has been effectively integrated to the surfing activity and demonstrates a model example of effective explicit skills transfer within established sport/life skills frameworks

Facilitated in a physical and emotional safe space, in communities where mental health provision and social support structures are lacking, the W4C surf therapy programme has been found to be key in a community-based mental health innovation

Offered by community-based surf mentors, children build strong bonds with local, relatable, consistent and caring adults; they have powerful, positive role models, someone to talk to, look up to and to steward them through their journey at W4C
### Our approach

#### Inputs
- Safe spaces
- Safe transport
- Surfboards & wetsuits
- Trained surf mentors/caring adults
- Community-based referral network

#### Activities
- Referrals & participant intake
- Surf mentor training and development
- Referral partner and parent engagement
- Weekly 3-hour surf therapy sessions (a fun, but challenging activity, combined with a coping skills curriculum)
- Weekly after care and Surf Club sessions
- Monitoring, reflection & learning
- Ongoing child protection and safeguarding processes
- Community & government advocacy

#### Outputs
- Annual cohorts of children who complete a 10-month surf therapy course and transition to an aftercare pathway
- Annual cohorts of surf mentors who deliver community-based mental health services

#### Long term outcomes
- Increase in economically active young people: Surf mentors who complete their 2 year pathway and successfully transition into employment
- Contribution to impact level changes:
  - Improvement in self-regulation and executive functioning: Enabling children (10-16 years) to regulate their behaviours/emotions, and make healthy life choices such as completing school, rejecting violence and gangs throughout their adolescent years
  - Improved overall well-being
  - Improved Heart Rate Variability (HRV); i.e. flexibility and ability to adapt to stress
  - Improved community-based network that can assess and prevent mental health challenges in children
  - Increased connections to opportunities for young people

#### Short/medium outcomes
- Improved overall well-being
- Improved Heart Rate Variability (HRV); i.e. flexibility and ability to adapt to stress
- Improved community-based network that can assess and prevent mental health challenges in children
- Increased connections to opportunities for young people

#### Contribution to impact level changes
- Reduced disease burden: Decreased incidence of anxiety and depression amongst young people
- Improved access to community-based, child-friendly mental health services
- Integrated and strengthened mental health services
- More resilient communities, that can identify mental health challenges in young people, promote early intervention and encourage investment in preventative services that support children’s health and well-being in line with SDG 3
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A day in the life of our child participants

I don’t always have someone to talk to at home... someone that can listen and help me deal better with the things that upset me.

School isn’t that bad. I sometimes feel better at school, because there is supervision and activities that keep us busy. But nobody likes me at school, which makes me sad.

I wake up in a community where children feel unsafe. If they want to play outside, they need someone to protect them. I don’t think this community has place for children, because they’re shooting here the whole time.

I can never wait for surfing at Waves for Change. I feel it is a safe space for me. Our surf coaches care about us. They listen when I talk. They teach me ways to calm down when I’m upset. It’s the best feeling to catch a wave. I never thought I would be able to do it! I feel happy when I surf! And one of the best things is, we get a nice meal after we surf.

Since going to W4C, I feel I can face difficult things better and I get along better with everyone at home. I’ve learnt what it means to respect others, to communicate better and to protect myself and others. My parents say I listen to them better and fight less with my brother.

My teachers say I am behaving better at school.

After an afternoon of surfing with my friends and coaches, I go home to tell my parents what I’ve learnt. I even taught my mom the Take 5 and the Power Hand. At school, I taught my other friends about meditation, they seem to be liking me more!

After a year of going to Waves for Change after school, I now go to weekend Surf Clubs. I’ve made new friends and now it’s going better at school also. My surf coach told me about things like nippers and other activities I can join with my friends. I feel part of something bigger now!
Our 2019 children

5 sites across South Africa: Muizenberg, Khayelitsha, Hout Bay, East London, Port Elizabeth

Serving children (aged 10 to 16) from over 47 communities across the Western and Eastern Cape

During 2019 we engaged a total of 1643 children in our surf therapy and Surf Club after care pathway

- 493 female
- 1150 male

980 children (441 F, 539 M) attended after-school surf therapy programmes

111 children (18 F, 93 M) attended specialised morning surf therapy programmes (e.g. children on the Autism Spectrum, and those at risk of being excluded from mainstream schooling)

552 children (105 F, 447 M) attended our Saturday Surf Clubs

Example of a community where we work, Khayelitsha
In 2019, 37 surf mentors (20 M, 17 F) delivered our service to children that needed it most.

W4C recruits, trains, supports, and empowers young adults (aged 18 to 25) from the same communities where our children are from, to lead W4C programmes for their own communities. Our surf mentors are given two year training contracts, ensuring consistent programme delivery whilst also improving local child care infrastructure and job readiness, allowing them to transition to job and study opportunities, after delivering the service for 2 years.

### Our 2019 changemakers

**In 2019, 73 certificates/qualifications were obtained by surf mentors:**

- 35 mentors obtained their Module One certification from ‘Keeping Children Safe Coalition International Training’
- 6 mentors obtained their ‘Surf Coach’ qualification
- 32 mentors obtained a First Aid qualification

**9 surf mentors moved on to formal employment:**

- 1 mentor was employed as a Surf Instructor at a top surf school in Muizenberg
- 1 mentor was employed at the South African Police Service
- 4 mentors were employed as full-time Lifeguards at Cape Town beaches
- 2 mentors were employed in water safety and education positions at other community-based organisations
- 1 mentor was employed as a youth development worker at a Cape Town based non-government organisation
Our surf mentors are mental health activists

Through facilitating the W4C surf therapy programme to children, our surf mentors learn and practice ways to self-regulate, themselves...

“My W4C ‘power object’ [which we make with children in one of our sessions] is a powerful weapon. I keep it close and I keep it safe. I use this object when the going gets tough, by holding it in my hand and squeezing it tight. It reminds me of my journey in life and everything I’ve overcome.”

They face similar challenges to the children in our programme...

“I struggle to express my emotions.”

“I have high levels of anxiety.”

“It can be hard to live in my community.”

“I have a fear of failure.”

“I sometimes struggle with self-doubt.”

By using the W4C ‘power hand’, I remember my strengths. I get calm and those words of self-doubt don’t stand a chance.”

They are the best suited for community-based, mental health intervention and advocacy work...

“Asking for help is not common in my community, due to stereotypes about mental health. People say you don’t have to speak to strangers about your mental state.”

“If you talk about your mental health, people think your mind is not working normally and you have to be treated differently.”

“But W4C is a child-friendly zone; a safe space where children can be themselves, share their feelings and get a different mindset.”

“Slowly but surely, we change how children see mental health, and they share this at home with their parents/carers.”

“As young people in our communities, we share our knowledge and values; we work hard to normalise asking for help and reaching out.”
In 2019, we prioritised consolidating our learning, and building an even more integrated, accessible, youth and community-led mental health service. We focussed on reaching children that need our service the most, and supporting the following gaps in mental health infrastructure:

- Access to mental health services is very low in the communities we work with
- Approximately 1 social worker for every 50,000 people
- Referral and diagnosis of mental disorders, especially among children and youth, is therefore extremely rare

The W4C surf therapy programme creates a community-based referral pathway by providing training on how to identify a child with a mental health challenge and creating a simple referral process so children get access to support as soon as possible.

We have set up and will be strengthening strong links to Departments of Education, Health and Social Development, to refer in/out of W4C’s surf therapy programme.

“There is a high treatment gap for mental disorders, both financial constraints, as well as a vast array of competing demands on government expenditure, severely limits the state’s capacity to provide, or even develop mental health services. There is thus a critical need in our country for NPOs, such as W4C, to provide services and to develop an evidence-base for safety and efficacy of that, to ultimately justify government expenditure.”

- Alan Winde, Premier of the Western Cape
1. W4C has adapted its surf therapy programme to function remotely. The W4C support hub (curriculum developer; monitoring, evaluation and learning team; & senior management) use coordinated WhatsApp Groups to communicate, train and equip the surf mentors for remote programme delivery which they, in turn, deliver through parent groups to reach the children & families in their catchment network.

2. W4C teams have had to innovate by bringing an entire beach-based curriculum onto an online and mobile delivery system, while building safeguarding principles into this new delivery mechanism.

3. The organisation has had to redirect financial and human resources to support the new way of working by providing mobile data to surf mentors, extending the debrief psychologists to offer more support during this time, offer online mentorship for surf mentors to help plan their transition from W4C, and adapting curriculum resources for home use. Resources are now available in 4 languages: isiXhosa, Afrikaan, Shona and English, in acknowledgment of the diversity of the communities and households we work with.

4. Children usually receive a meal at surf therapy and were expressing tension at home due to food insecurity. W4C is acutely aware that although debrief psychologists and emotional regulation is critical during this period - without meeting families basic needs, children and young people will be at a much greater risk of abuse and mental health challenges. To address this immediate need, the organisation redirected resources to personally deliver food parcels to children's families as a means of diffusing immediate stress and building trust with families. We continue to support households with food vouchers (until end 2020).
The theory behind what we do

W4C children experience at least 8 traumatic events per year. Chronic exposure to trauma changes the brain’s structure, due to increased stress hormones, such as cortisol and prolonged stress responses (both physical and thought processes). These decreased neural connections affect learning, memory and regulation. This also results in impaired decision-making, fear-processing, memory and stress management. As well as an increased risk of mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, behavioural disorders and suicidality.

W4C’s surf therapy programme uses theory and evidence-based approaches to help children rebuild their brain functioning. The core pillars of our programme, including the curriculum we use and the way we equip our surf mentors, are informed by the theories and approaches below:

- **Neuroplasticity**
  - the trauma-caused damaged brain can reorganise itself, and form new neural connections

- **Mind-body therapy**
  - enhances the mind’s positive impact on the body

- **Social and emotional learning**
  - the process through which children understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions

- **Executive functioning**
  - a set of mental skills that include working memory, flexible thinking, and self-control

- **Behaviour activation**
  - helps children engage in more enjoyable activities, improve their problem-solving and teaches them their positive behaviour can positively affect their mood and well-being

- **Trauma-informed mindfulness**
  - focus on sensations and other practices that ground you in the present moment
DESIGNING OUR PROGRAMME

• W4C surf therapy programme was informed by, designed, and formalised through a participatory, child-led PhD study, at the University of Cape Town
• Participatory methods included a child-reference group, focus group discussions, community mapping and photo voicing
• Child participants lay the foundation for the W4C programme, through describing and making recommendations based on their childhood, social connectedness, activities they like and spaces where they feel safe

FEASIBILITY OF OUR PROGRAMME

• Study conducted with the University of Cape Town
• The study found that "the W4C model is plausible and should have the desired effect if delivered as intended"
• Four main recommendations were made, to assist us in improving our programme implementation
• Subsequent programme adjustments included: improve attendance and dosage, simplify the coping-skills curriculum, improve female attendance and retention, increase coach support

PROGRAMME OUTCOMES

• Quasi-experiment showed statistically significant programme outcomes were found over a 6-month period of surf therapy exposure, including increased self-esteem, confidence and happiness, decreased violent/fighting behaviour, and decreased involvement in gangs and anti-social groups
• Qualitative study with children on the Autism Spectrum showed surf therapy can be appropriate and beneficial to neuro-diverse children; with adjustments to the programme, such as increased visual materials and using Makaton as a ‘delivery language’
• Qualitative study with children 12 months after completing the W4C surf therapy programme showed a) coping skills learnt through surf therapy (such as meditation, communication and respect), were used long after participants completed surf therapy programmes
• Quantitative study using Heart Rate Variability (HRV) as a biomarker showed surf therapy can improve children’s coping and self-regulation

PROGRAMME IMPACT

• We have embarked on longitudinal impact assessments of our work, as an integrated, community-based mental health prevention and intervention service
• Working with local and international universities, we are probing the responsible scaling and impact of our work at a community level

Journey of our evidence

2014/2015
2015/2016
2018/2019
2020/2021
The Wave Alliance
An Ocean for Everyone

New in 2019 - sharing and scaling through partnerships

Ashoka challenges Waves for Change to grow the practice of surf therapy. Without growing the Waves for Change organization.

After 2 years of prototyping and piloting, W4C launches the world's first surf therapy incubator to help passionate community leaders bring the power of surf therapy to their coastlines.
To scale more efficiently, W4C open sources all training materials and creates a 5-step process to allow NGO's and surf-schools to open their own surf therapy programmes.

**One**

Apply for Training: W4C releases an open source 'Surf Therapy Playbook' and invites NGO's, CBO's, surf schools and other youth development organisations to apply for training and mentorship.

**Two**

Deliver local sessions: Applicants screened for child safety and granted access to W4C curriculum, coach training manuals and impact assessment tools. Organisations that use tools to deliver sessions at their local beach and share their progress are invited to...

**Three**

Training in Cape Town: W4C offers two-weeks of intensive face-to-face training in Cape Town, for two senior leaders from each partner organisation. After training, each team returns home where they...

**Four**

Deliver and evaluate a pilot: W4C grants each organisation boards and wetsuits to start a programme, and additional programme and evaluation support to deliver, measure and write-up a pilot project at their local beach.

**Five**

Write-up your evaluation: On completing evaluations, each partner organisation is supported to share their learning and map their networks. This helps partners secure onward funding to scale programming further and present work at national and international conferences.

More locally owned, evidence-based surf therapy programmes exist!
1. **Elman Peace, Somalia**
   Introduced surfing to programme in Mogadishu

2. **Ali Royals, Ghana**
   Introduced surfing to soccer programme in Ghana

3. **Waves for Hope, Trinidad & Tobago**
   A few pro-surfers who run a board drive called Positive Vibe Warriors

4. **Alto Peru, Peru**
   Adding therapy curriculum to surf and other sport

5. **Olas del Alma, Argentina**
   Adding local mental health support to surf school

6. **Olas y Sonrisas, Costa Rica**
   Constructive programme for at-risk youth

7. **Messeh Leone Foundation & Dept Tourism, Sierre Leone**
   Public partnership launches surf therapy programmes at five beaches in Freetown, Sierre Leone

Wave Alliance trains local leaders to adapt W4C methodology to their local context

By Jan 2020, 11 partners launched surf therapy programmes

By Dec 2020, 20 partners will run surf therapy programmes
Our 2019 funders and supporters

Agence Française de Développement | Allan Gray | British Embassy | BT Supporters Club
CapitalOne | City of Cape Town | Comic Relief | French Embassy | DG Murray Trust
EMpower Foundation | Finisterre | Grassroots Youth | Hunt Foundation | Innovation Edge
Innowind | Isiqalo Foundation (UK & US) | Juice Films
Laureus Global Sport for Good Foundation | Laureus Sport for Good South Africa
Life & Brand | MAID | Mami Wata | Murray & Roberts
National Lotteries Commission South Africa | Nichols PLC | Nussbaum
Old Mutual Two Oceans Marathon | Reef | SOL Foundation | Swedish Postcodes
The Lunchbox Fund | Tias Arms | University of Cape Town | VANS | Viiv Healthcare
Wise Philanthropy | World Childhood Foundation | YachtAid

Thank you for making this possible
Contact Us

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