

Some Strategies for Working with Young Offenders

Developed by Garner Clancey

Helping young people to prevent involvement in crime can be a responsibility that falls to many adults. Having some strategies to help young people build greater insight into the decisions they make, the consequences of their actions and alternative strategies of coping with particular situations can be beneficial. The following are some simple examples of strategies that can be employed when working with young offenders.

Understanding Behavioural Change

Before considering some strategies to help young people to change their behaviour and to maintain these changes (as is often demanded by criminal justice agencies), the following exercise is designed to encourage some understanding of the sacrifices that are often required to commence and maintain some form of behavioural change.

Reflective Exercise:

1. Choose one behaviour or habit that you would like to change. It might be reducing or stopping alcohol consumption, quitting smoking, increasing your physical activity, spending more time with your partner/child(ren)/friends or reading more.
2. Once you have chosen the particular behaviour or habit, devise a plan for how you will manage this change. This might include identifying a start date, the number of times you want to do a new activity or how many hours you will need to dedicate to a new activity, weekly goals, what rewards you might give yourself for meeting your weekly goals and strategies for managing potential threats to your efforts to reach your targets.

The purpose of this reflective exercise is to personally consider some form of behavioural change. Not engaging in crime often requires considerable changes in a young person's life: not mixing with particular friends, ceasing consumption of alcohol and other drugs, attending school, participating in counselling, etc. This can require giving up certain activities that the young person derives pleasure or kudos from and might be replaced with dull appointments that demand discipline. By trying to change your own behaviour, you will become more familiar with some of the challenges of maintaining behavioural change.

Offending Decision Making Tree

When asked, 'why did you get in a fight / damage the street furniture / steal the mobile phone', many young people will reply, 'I dunno'. Building insight into the decisions resulting in offending behaviour can be beneficial in helping to prevent offending.

The following exercise simply requires the young person to identify decisions that they made prior to a particular offence. Along the timeline, the young person can list what they did prior to the offence. They can then be encouraged to consider what alternative decisions they could have made to prevent their involvement in the crime.



The purpose of this exercise is to plot the decisions that contributed to offending. Meeting friends, consuming alcohol, having a fight with parents/siblings/partner, wanting to have fun, taking risks, spending money and needing to get home, etc. might be commonly identified contributing factors. Once the decisions are listed, then there is scope to discuss alternative decisions that the young person could have made in the situation that they found themselves. Try to reality test these alternative decisions – Could you really do that? What would your mates say? Have you tried that before? How did it go?

Relapse Prevention

Helping a young person to understand the triggers for their involvement in crime can be particularly helpful in preventing relapse (or reoffending). Getting a young person to work through the following table can aid their understanding of potential cues or triggers that precede their involvement in crime.

	Days of Week	Times of Day	Situations	Thoughts	Friends
Danger Signs					
Ways of Coping					

Once the danger signs are identified, then it is possible to discuss some of the strategies of coping when these situations arise. Once again, reality testing the answers will be beneficial. By engaging in discussion and encouraging the young person to develop scripts to negotiate the various dangerous or risky situations, it will help prepare the young person for coping with actual events.

Peer Refusal

Young people often offend in the company of other young people. The pressure to participate in an offending episode can increase with the presence of peers. Consequently, peer refusal techniques can be helpful in combating this pressure to offend.

Devise some scenarios around situations that the young person has identified in the previous exercises. For example, if a certain peer has been identified as having a particularly strong negative influence, then develop scenarios where the young person and their friend come together. The friend encourages drug use, truanting, stealing, fighting, etc. Ask the young person to provide verbal scripts for how they would respond. Use and add to the list below as a way of enhancing the verbal scripts available to the young person:

- No thanks.
- Not in this lifetime.
- Been there and done that.
- I'll catch up with you after.
- Why don't we go to the movies instead?
- I can't, it'll stuff up my bail.