

Delivering Relationship Education in the Juvenile Justice System

Why deliver relationship education in the juvenile justice system? The answer is really quite simple: many system-involved young people have not been exposed to or experienced healthy relationships. In fact, many youth in the juvenile justice system struggle with attachment due to unhealthy relationships in their family of origin. Research shows that teens' relationship experiences inform the relationships they have as adults. For these young people to be productive, successful, citizens, couples and parents, we must provide them with the tools to have successful romantic relationships, friendships and social acquaintances. To support the success of system-involved youth, this Tip Sheet provides relationship education practitioners background on the special needs of this population and tips on how to prepare for effective relationship skill-building in a juvenile justice setting.

Background

Law enforcement agencies reported 2.18 million arrests of juveniles (persons under age 18) in 2007. Juveniles are arrested for two types of delinquency offenses. The first type of offense is a behavior that would be a criminal law violation for an adult (95% of cases). The other offense is called a "status" offense. Status offenses are delinquent actions that do not apply to adults, like running away and truancy (5% of cases). Juvenile incarceration has risen in recent years, especially among young women.

Over the last fifteen years, the number of female offenders, adolescent and adult, has increased



significantly forcing the juvenile justice system to make some significant theoretical shifts in the way they carry out correctional/rehabilitation programming within their facilities. These shifts toward female-focused programming have caused providers to re-examine correctional/ rehabilitation programming among male juvenile offenders. This service delivery shift provides an opportunity for relationship education.

Although there is great diversity among young people in the juvenile justice system, there are some trends of which practitioners should be aware:

- Youth involved in the juvenile justice system are likely to experience: societal identification as a juvenile delinquent; interruption in their educational progress; marginalization among peer groups; and increased family strife.
- It has been estimated that the majority of young people involved in the juvenile justice system, male and female, experienced their first sexual experience between the ages of 10 and 11.

- Because their teen years have been interrupted, many of the youth involved in the juvenile justice system have not had a lot of experience communicating with and dating either the opposite sex or same sex.
- The inability to identify and participate in pro-social, positive, healthy relationships is consistent with the inability to function in mainstream society.
- There is a significant difference between developmental/emotional age and actual age of most youth in the juvenile justice system. Therefore, older teens may have very immature relationship expectations.
- The majority of the youth involved in the juvenile justice system have been exposed to some past neglect and/or trauma. Many young men and an even greater number of young women in the juvenile justice system have been victimized sexually.
- Many young people in the juvenile justice system are questioning their sexual identity, although data is not widely available about sexual orientation among juvenile offenders. Relationship-based education must be aware of, sensitive to, and knowledgeable of the relationship differences, dynamics and requirements of both gay and lesbian youth in the juvenile justice system.

The following tips are based on experience delivering a variety of programming within the juvenile justice system, and can enhance relationship education/programming.

1) Group size and duration is important. The table below summarizes the ideal group size based on gender and age. Many times when conducting

larger groups with younger youth, the emphasis of the group strays from the actual topic of the group, to just maintaining behavior. Understanding the average attention span and relationship experiences of young people by age and gender helps make relationship education workshops more successful.

Youth Ages	Gender	Group Size	Duration
10-15	Male	8-10	30-40 min
10-15	Female	8-12	45-60 min
16-21	Male	14-16	75-90 min
16-21	Female	14-18	90-120 min (with 5-10 min break)

2) Workshop format must meet the needs of different populations within the juvenile justice system.

A weekly class is appropriate for youth who are spending an extended period of time in placement. However, the nature of many juvenile justice facilities is very transient. If the program is being presented to a group of pre-adjudicated youth (those waiting for their next hearing, bail and/or placement), a modular approach should be utilized, as youth may come and go on a weekly or even daily basis. When working with transient groups:

- Focus on important essential information. You may need to reorganize your curriculum or identify key concepts to teach if you have limited time to reach young people.
- Provide memorable activities. Experiential learning is a fundamental teaching strategy.
- Take frequent breaks (every 30-40 minutes for ages 10-15 and 45-60 minutes for ages 16-21).
- Mix up the types of information delivery by using videos, music, activities, etc.

- Keep the entire module three to four hours in length.

3) Trauma-based memories may surface during curriculum delivery. As previously mentioned, the majority of the youth involved in the juvenile justice system have been exposed to some past neglect and/or trauma. Before starting any relationship-based lessons, ensure that there are therapeutic staff available to address triggered individuals during and after the group. If at all possible, speak to the therapeutic staff before and after the group. Try to find out as much information as you can about the participants prior to conducting the first lesson. Do not “require” everyone to participate. Watch for signs of re-traumatization such as sudden withdrawal or emotional outbursts. Your organization may want to create a protocol to follow should this occur.

4) Reading challenges. Low literacy characteristics can be mistaken for shyness or go unnoticed. Use some form of assessment: Listen for excuses like, “I didn’t bring my glasses,” or, “I hurt my hand,” when participants are handed reading material or given forms to fill out. Use pictures, charts and videos in your lessons. Utilize symbols instead of words that are spelled out. For example, when teaching about emotional intelligence, use photographs of people to illustrate emotions. You may want to rely less on PowerPoint presentations and more on activities that do not require long periods of concentration or a lot of reading.

5) Class materials. The detention center you are working in may not offer technology so be prepared to bring your own laptop and projector to show DVDs, CDs, etc. Further, make sure you know your facility’s rules about having sharp objects like staples in your handouts and about giving youth materials like workbooks to take back to their

living quarters. Many youth correctional institutions require a period of time to review the curriculum before they will approve it so it is important to allow lead time in your organization’s planning activities. A complete list of materials that you will be bringing into the facility may also be required.

6) Take your time and be patient while teaching relationship skills. You may need to slow down in some areas, particularly lessons related to youth learning about themselves, knowing others, communication, conflict resolution and parenting. Present more in-depth information and offer activities to help young people learn these topics. Keep in mind that a significant amount of time will need to be spent discussing what healthy relationships look like. This means emphasizing that abuse of any kind is not part of a healthy relationship. It also includes teaching youth to identify what physical and emotional abuse looks like.

7) Curriculum Modification. Pay attention to the content of the curriculum. For example, curricula often make assumptions about young people that do not fit with the needs of all populations. The content may assume that young people have a concept of what a family can be or that they know how to trust and manage boundaries. You may need to teach these basics first to establish a foundation. As you give examples and work through the curriculum, be sensitive to young people who do not have relationships with their parents, assumptions about the role of sex in relationships, and gay and lesbian relationships.

Delivering relationship-based education in the juvenile justice system is imperative to help young people who may not have been exposed to healthy relationships. When youth are removed from mainstream society and institutionalized, their

ability to form healthy interpersonal relationships is compromised dramatically. The ability of an individual to initiate and maintain positive and supportive relationships is one of the most significant markers of a successful transition from a life of delinquency to life as a productive citizen.

Additional Resources

Juvenile Delinquency and Family Structure:
Implications for Marriage and Relationship Education
<http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/docs/juveniledelinquency.pdf>

Relationships Matter: Strengthening Vulnerable
Youth - Proceedings Summary
<http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/docs/RelationshipsMatter.pdf>

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