

What research tells us about effective interventions for juvenile offenders

A WHAT WORKS, WISCONSIN FACT SHEET

BY CAILIN O'CONNOR

University of Wisconsin–Madison/Extension

January 2008

Program Design and Content

- ◆ **Interventions are most effective when they are theory-driven and use active learning methods.**

Many effective juvenile offender programs are based on **social learning theory**. These programs achieve behavior change through social interaction, role modeling, and role-playing positive new behaviors with people the offender can relate to.

Cognitive-behavioral treatments are also quite effective. These interventions help offenders to replace their negative thought patterns with more positive ones. These programs or therapies also offer opportunities for participants to practice their new skills and positive behaviors.

- ◆ **Effective programs target dynamic criminogenic needs or risk factors** – Programs address current issues in a given offender's life that are correlated with criminal activity, more so than they target non-criminogenic needs. One study found that programs targeting four or more criminogenic needs reduced recidivism, while programs targeting three or fewer actually increased recidivism among participants.

Program Relevance

- ◆ **High-risk and low-risk offenders should never be in the same program** – Putting low-risk offenders in overly restrictive programs with higher-risk peers increases recidivism for the low-risk offenders. The more resource-intensive, high-supervision programs should be reserved for medium- and high-risk offenders, with lesser sanctions available for low-risk offenders.
 - ◆ **Using a validated risk assessment tool is the best way to ensure that offenders' risk of recidivism is fairly measured and taken into account.**
 - ◆ **Effective juvenile justice systems are responsive to offenders' individual characteristics and readiness for treatment** – Offenders who have substance abuse issues, for example, need AODA treatment before they will be able to take responsibility for their actions or make lasting changes in their behavior. Courts and juvenile justice officials also need to be responsive to offenders' individual characteristics such as learning style and motivation to change, in order to assign offenders to the most appropriate programs.
-

Program Delivery

- ◆ **Trusting relationships are key to behavior change** – When offenders have the opportunity to develop relationships with staff they can relate to, they are more likely to make meaningful changes in their behavior. Consistency of staffing over time is important to program success.
- ◆ **Effective programs are mindful of the risks of peer influence** – Studies comparing group and individual administration of similar programs have found that the grouping of deviant youth can reduce positive effects of interventions and even cause adverse effects.

Younger youth who are modestly deviant are the most susceptible to negative peer influence and should not be aggregated in groups. These youth should especially not be grouped with slightly older youth who have committed similar crimes.

When offenders are grouped, staff should actively create and maintain a prosocial peer culture, and provide a high level of structure to group interactions.

- ◆ **Staying true to the program design is critical to program effectiveness** – When implementing a program that has been successful in the past or in other settings, it is important to closely replicate the program model. This means maintaining core program components such as caseload limits, frequency of contact with offenders, and total hours of program contact.

References

Carey, M. (2007). *Effective Research-Based Practices*. Madison, WI: Presentation at the Southern Child Welfare Training Partnership, May 21, 2007. <http://www.thecareygroupinc.com/>

Dodge, K.A., Dishion, T.J., & Lansford, J.E. (2006). Deviant peer influences in intervention and public policy for youth. *Social Policy Report: Society for Research in Child Development*, 20(1), 1-20. <http://www.srpd.org/documents/publications/SPR/spr20-1.pdf>

Latessa, E.J. & Lowenkamp, C.T. (2006). What works in reducing recidivism. *University of St. Thomas Law Journal*, 3(3), 521-535. <http://www.uc.edu/criminaljustice/Articles.html>

WHAT WORKS, WISCONSIN FACT SHEETS

This is one of a series of Fact Sheets prepared by the *What Works, Wisconsin* team at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, School of Human Ecology, and Cooperative Extension, University of Wisconsin–Extension. The fact sheets and other related resources can be downloaded from: <http://whatworks.uwex.edu/Pages/1factsheet.html>

This publication may be cited without permission provided the source is identified as: O'Connor, C. (2008). What research tells us about effective interventions for juvenile offenders. *What Works, Wisconsin Fact Sheet*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin–Madison/Extension.

This project was supported in part by Grant Award No. JF-04-PO-0025 awarded by the Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance through the Wisconsin Governor's Juvenile Justice Commission with funds from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

