

Working with Young Offenders – Pro-Social Modelling

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One of the most important ways young offenders and young people-at-risk learn and adopt new social skills, values and behaviour is through observing and learning from the behaviour of those around them. While such mechanisms are prominent in family environments and among peer groups, research indicates that programmers who consistently and actively model social and problem solving skills, core values and behaviours consistent with a pro-social lifestyle have a greater influence on the subsequent offending rates of the people they work with. In line with the age old position that 'what we do is often more important than what we say', the research indicates that the behaviour, values and attitudes expressed by workers often has a significant influence on young people.

Some key elements of pro-social modelling are listed below.¹




Important Areas	Description and Examples
Behaviours	Emphasizing behaviours indicative of good values and attitudes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the use of manners in social situations • being on time to appointments • following through on commitments • acknowledging mistakes
Values	Expressing what values are important to you and addressing behaviour not consistent with these values <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • importance of honesty and being upfront • talking straight and limiting excuses • taking responsibility for actions • not putting others down • addressing young person if being untruthful or using excuses • having fun and enjoying your self • importance of your own personal boundaries
Problem Solving & Logical Reasoning	Modelling good problem solving skills - verbally define problems, state the alternatives for action, and provide the logic for your decision to go with a particular action <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • young person misbehaves, state options, and give rationale for your decision • acknowledge anger where relevant, and model appropriate strategies for dealing with anger
Optimism & Openness to Change	Express genuine and realistic optimism about the possibilities for young people to improve their lives and overcome their problems. Be open to alternatives when consistent with core values <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • express an expectation that young person can stay out of trouble - identify strengths and possibilities for change • communicate that a mistake does not mean failure • use examples of where people have overcome adversity
Humour & Resilience	Use of humour to indicate the importance of fun in certain situations, and to deal with adversity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use humour to reduce tension & anxiety • express optimism through humour • obvious care needs to be taken not to put down others, or undermine own authority

¹ Adapted from Trotter, C. (1999) **Working with Involuntary Clients**. Sage: London



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Young people involved in crime will often have experienced difficult, chaotic home lives. The absence of appropriate role models and boundaries results in many young offenders having limited insight into their behaviour and the consequences of their behaviour on others. As a result, how young offenders think and act in social situations is often quite different from their non-offending peers – in their upbringing they have not learnt many of the beliefs and skills that most of us take for granted. For professionals working with young offenders, it is important to have a framework to guide and shape interventions that will address this aspect of young offenders' functioning.

The psycho-social functioning model is a particularly effective model on which to base interventions that help young people to better understand their own behaviour. This model breaks down behaviour into preceding elements, such as beliefs, triggers, thoughts, feelings and actions. The diagram below depicts this model and provides a brief description of each component and the potential ways that each component might contribute to offending.¹

Process And Examples	Description
 <p>Examples: 'everyone has insurance', 'if someone puts you down you have to hit back', 'I can't control myself'</p>	<p>Beliefs - Attitudes and Values</p> <p>Beliefs are the values and attitudes we have about ourselves, other people and the world. Many high risk offenders will have anti-social beliefs that serve to validate their offending behaviour. Beliefs influence what events trigger our emotions, and how we behave. Many high risk offenders will not be familiar with having more positive beliefs about themselves (self esteem) and others, and also the influence of negative beliefs on their behaviour.</p>
 <p>Examples: A car with a window down, an argument with parents or partner, being geed up by peers</p>	<p>Trigger Events and High Risk Situations</p> <p>These are events or situations that trigger thoughts and emotional reactions in people. The beliefs we have and past habits will make some events more likely to be triggers. Often high risk offenders will not know the types of events that put them at risk of offending, or how to manage these events when they occur.</p>
 <p>Examples: 'they left the window down', 'no-one cares about me', 'they think I'm soft', 'this is the last time I'll do it',</p>	<p>Thoughts and Self Talk</p> <p>After an event we interpret events through our thoughts. Also called "self talk", what a young person says to themselves after something happens will influence the way they feel, and react to an event. Young people often believe they can't change the way they think – but in reality with practice most people can change how they think. Habits are basically patterns of thinking and behaving– to break a habit young people need to change the way they think.</p>

¹ This model draws from Prigrove, P. (1993). 'A relapse prevention approach to reducing aggressive behaviour', in S.A. Gerrull and W. Lucas (Eds.) **Serious violent offenders: Sentencing, psychiatry and law reform**. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

 <p>FEELINGS</p> <p>Examples: 'I feel like ripping his head off (angry)', 'I was hyped up (excited),</p>	<p>Feelings</p> <p>Feelings are emotions which indicate whether something is good-bad, or exciting-boring. The way a person interprets an event and what they say to themselves influences how they feel. Often offenders don't know the difference between feelings, thinking and doing. Feeling angry or feeling tempted to steal does not mean a person has to be violent or steal. Through identifying their feelings and changing the way they think, young people can change how they react to situations.</p>
 <p>ACTIONS</p> <p>Offending examples: stealing, assault, joy riding</p> <p>Skill examples: negotiation, refusal skills, relaxation, assertive behaviour, making friends</p>	<p>Actions and Behaviour</p> <p>What young offenders do, or their actions, are influenced by their beliefs, thoughts, and feelings they have about an event. Through influencing and giving them skills in identifying triggers, changing their thinking and the way they feel in situations, the likelihood of offending can be reduced. Young people develop more understanding about themselves and how to control of how they feel and what they do.</p> <p>What young people do is also influenced by what they know how do and have confidence in doing. Through developing young people's skills in alternative behaviours, their confidence to adopt different beliefs and thinking patterns is also more likely to increase. Through practicing behaviours, habits can be changed.</p>