



# Making choices for change

*Graeme Munford and Mike Garland outline the 'Break Away Adolescent Stopping Offending' course, a youth offending programme at the Lower North Youth Justice Residential Centre*

## **Background**

The goal of the youth offending programme developed at Lower North Youth Justice Residential Centre in 2004 was to reduce reoffending among young people after their time in the residence. The key objective was to teach young people the skills to make choices that are less likely to result in their reoffending, and the programme was designed to target intervention with young people completing supervision with residence orders. Mike Garland, of Changemaker Consultants, developed the programme with assistance from residential staff Raymond Lightband and Lee Waitere.

Recent research highlighting factors<sup>1</sup> likely to lead to effective programme outcomes was considered in the design. Reports on youth offending, including the 2002 Ministerial Taskforce Report and the Government's Youth Offending Strategy, were also reviewed. One point reiterated by both these reports was the need for comprehensive and intensive interventions for serious young offenders.

Child, Youth and Family identified the need for effective targeting of interventions with high-

risk recidivist young offenders as one of seven priority areas in response to these reports in its Youth Justice Plan released in 2002. A review of the Department's Residential Services Strategy in 2003 referred similarly to the need for youth justice services to focus on achieving effective outcomes with young people.

## **The programme**

Several factors were taken into consideration when assessing young people for inclusion in the programme:

1. Adequate time remaining under their Youth Court order enabling them to fully complete the course.
2. Their motivation level – they had to be either highly motivated or show potential to address their offending behaviour.
3. The compatibility of participants, such as any gang affiliations.
4. Their age and maturity.
5. The client's consent to participate.
6. Cultural considerations such as concepts of family, authority and spirituality, and adapting stories and metaphors to better suit the course participants.
7. Their level of literacy.

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive review of these factors, see *Tough is Not Enough: Getting smart about your crime* (McLaren, 2000).

As well as meeting these criteria, a young person's participation in the programme was included as part of their individual care plan, which in some cases was a condition of their Court supervision plan. It was envisaged that the young person's individual care plan would include transitional arrangements for young people leaving the residence, ideally taking into account any positive outcomes achieved by their participation in the programme.

### ***Programme methodology and design***

Underpinning the course content is cognitive-behavioural theory, supported by strengths-based concepts and tools (Turnell and Edwards, 1999). Tools utilised include:

- goal setting
- finding exceptions to problem behaviour
- using scaling to concretely rate emotional response
- assessing willingness, confidence and capacity
- determining personal and family strengths and resources.

The course itself consists of 10 sessions lasting for one and half hours and involving six participants and three facilitators. The course is run over four to five weeks, with two or three sessions each week, which enables most young people to join around the middle of their stay in the residence.

The participant group is deliberately kept small because this offers the best possible chance for positive group dynamics to occur and plenty of opportunity for one-on-one work. The course is interactive, using music, video, drawing,

mapping, warm-up activities, storytelling, discussion and key messages as some of the ways to enhance learning. There is also an emphasis on developing trust, personal responsibility and having some fun.

The course is divided into three phases. In the first phase of five sessions, the whole group works together to build a supportive team dynamic. They explore their beliefs and the nature of their offending, influences in their peer group and their family background. This involves looking at their lives now (strengths and 'hot spots') and making deliberate choices

and plans for their future.

The young people are introduced to 'Ricky' or 'Sione' (characters in fictionalised stories based on real-life events about a young man and his offending) and the concepts involved in 'offence chaining'. This

is an activity where participants map out the events, behaviour, emotions, feelings and thinking processes leading up to an offence. This technique is similar to an activity used in the Department of Corrections 'Straight Thinking' programme.

The offence chain is constructed in the second phase of the course. The group is divided in two and the smaller groups attend sessions six to eight where they work one-on-one with a facilitator to develop their personal offence chain. Here they are introduced to some key new terms for self management and impulse control – including 'problem with immediate gratification', 'seemingly irrelevant decisions', 'high risk situations' and 'bail points', which are points in the offence chain where the

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young person could pull out of the offending pattern. It has been interesting to discover how easily the young people have caught on to this terminology and use it while still in the residence to discuss their own and others' behaviour and, in some cases, to make positive changes.

In session seven, each participant does a presentation to their 'small group' – the three facilitators and three of their peers. It is usually a huge challenge for them to present in front of their peers, and the other young people actively and constructively participate in this. In session eight each participant works on a personalised action plan and relapse prevention strategy.

In the last part, sessions nine and ten, the whole group comes back together to review the course and give and get feedback on their participation, from both the facilitators and their peers.

Session 10 consists of a graduation ceremony and celebration, attended by some of the staff and invited guests.

### ***Programme evaluation***

The programme is now completing its 12th run and anecdotal feedback indicates that it is having significant impact on some young people's behaviour. Also, as the programme becomes better known, field social workers are actively adding it to residential plans for their clients. Recently a young person completed the programme a second time (having been readmitted to the residence for breaching the reporting requirements of his supervision order). It was apparent by his level of disclosure and depth of insight into his offending that he had retained some key learning from his first time on the programme.

Previous research on the New Zealand youth justice system indicates that critical factors

associated with reoffending can be identified (Maxwell, Robertson, Kingi, Morris and Cunningham, 2004). Widely accepted predictors for reoffending include early negative outcomes for young people and the absence of close relationships with significant others. Family group conference outcomes that lead to a participant feeling remorse and subsequent life events such as obtaining training, developing close relationships, avoiding criminal associates and establishing a stable lifestyle are likely to have a positive impact on reducing reoffending. Among all of these predictors, it would appear that the latter two are the most significant in the context of the programme provided at Lower North. The next step would be to conduct formal research to identify further factors associated with the achievement of the goals of the programme.

The support young people receive once they leave the residence underpins the success of this programme. Anecdotal research conducted at Lower North in December 2004 indicated that young people were most likely to reoffend in the first six months following their departure from the residence. The presence of positive adult role models and the opportunity to form close relationships with significant others are important factors in reinforcing the positive learning outcomes from the programme.

As if to underscore these points, it would appear that much emphasis in the literature in recent times has been on the importance of early intervention programmes. While this emphasis is significant, the need for programmes that effectively deal with young people once they are in the youth justice system is an important reality. Effective youth justice practice is equally about providing services and programmes at each point on the continuum and, in this case,

mentoring young people who are already in the system (Evans and Ave, 2000).

As an area of practice, youth justice is not every social worker's first career choice. The challenge to attract and retain staff working in this field is one that needs to be continually addressed alongside the factors that are likely to lead to positive outcomes for young people. Arguably, effective programme outcomes and development lead to greater staff satisfaction. Skill development for staff through the opportunity to facilitate programmes such as the one at Lower North can be linked to increased staff morale and better relationships with young people.

### **Conclusion**

Identifying goals for a young person while they are in a residence is a primary consideration. There is a need for programmes where young people can learn positive skills and so reduce the likelihood that they will reoffend. The importance of this goal was highlighted as a key priority area in Child, Youth and Family's Youth Justice Plan in 2002. The 'Challenging Offending' programme developed at Lower North in 2004 resulted in part from this recommendation and the realisation that very few residential programmes had been developed for high-risk recidivist young offenders in the 14 to 17 age group.

The key objective of the Lower North programme was to target intervention that provided young people with decision-making skills that they could use (or adapt) once they were out of the residence, and that would ultimately

lead to a reduction in offending behaviour. The programme was designed to meet the needs of young people who were currently serving supervision with residence orders. It is critical in ensuring that they first, have some motivation to change their behaviour, second, are able to ultimately accept accountability and responsibility for their offending and, finally, are able to mix in a group appropriately with other young people.

Young people cannot be expected to make positive decisions on their own without appropriate support and mentoring. Anecdotal

evidence suggests the success of this programme depends largely on follow-up care once young people leave the residence. Avoiding placing young people, for example, in situations where they form close bonds with others involved in offending once they leave care has

been found to be a critical factor in reducing reoffending (Maxwell et al, 2004). Building on the positive outcomes achieved by programmes such as the one at Lower North is a challenge faced by those working both in the field and in residential care. Developing knowledge of effective youth offending programmes and the skills to facilitate these is an integral part of promoting effective staff practice and ultimately improving outcomes for young people.

### **Acknowledgments**

We are grateful to the Department of Corrections for an initial discussion and their advice on selection criteria and the basic structure of the programme.

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