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Effective strategies in working with young offenders

Improving the quality of programs to prevent youth crime is important to enhance outcomes for children and adolescents, to increase community perceptions of safety, and reduce crime. Diversion and community corrections programs are one form of early intervention designed to protect young offenders from the negative effects of incarceration, and to reduce stigma and negative peer influence. However, only high-quality programs will produce the best results.

Effective early intervention programs using diversion or community justice orders will generally have the following characteristics: a focus on skill development, a problem focus, ongoing assessment throughout the program to monitor progress, a component that requires the young person to do work outside of sessions, and engagement between the therapist or justice worker and young person (Trupin 2007).

A number of key elements have also been identified by Trupin (2007) as being important for effective service provision. These include:

- the personal qualities of service providers
 - important qualities of therapists/justice workers include warmth, cultural sensitivity, skills to motivate clients and that the worker does not alienate clients
 - experience is important, but programs with experienced young caseworkers are also valuable
- training and protocol adherence
 - documentation of program components and intensive training is essential
 - high staff to family ratios are needed to allow more frequent contact between the clients and the service provider
- clinical supervision
 - consistent and ongoing professional supervision with stated goals is essential to gain successful outcomes
- collaboration with stakeholders in the system
 - as effective strategies often involve not only offenders but their families, schools, coaches, and parole officers etc., collaboration is often required, and this is particularly beneficial to alter high-risk behaviours and encourage pro-social behaviours in at-risk youth.

Reference

Trupin E 2007. Evidence-based treatment for justice-involved youth, in Kessler CL & Kraus LJ (eds), *The mental health needs of young offenders: forging paths toward reintegration and rehabilitation*. New York: Cambridge University Press