

EDJJ NOTES

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In the News

Resilience and Incarcerated Youth

One form of resilience among youth in juvenile corrections is the ability to become successful, law-abiding citizens upon release, in spite of difficult personal or environmental factors. The concept of resilience has crucial service delivery implications. For example, a better understanding of this characteristic may serve to focus and strengthen intervention efforts for youth who are at-risk, involved with the juvenile justice system, and as youth transition back to the community.¹

In a recent study, Todis, Bullis, Waintrup, Schultz, and D'Ambrosio (2001) examined a group of youth that had transitioned from correctional facilities back into their communities between 1995 and 2000. The researchers' goal was to determine the factors contributing to resilience in adolescents who engage in early criminal activity.

In a report based on their study, the researchers discussed the pre-delinquent history, experience in the justice system, and transition experiences of fifteen youth. Each was nominated as *successful* by corrections staff based on exhibition of three of four criteria: post-release employment or enrollment in school, no re-arrests, no



Bonnie Todis and Michael Bullis

institutionalization for substance abuse or emotional problems, and a report of general satisfaction.² Dr. Todis recalls, "These youth were, in essence, the stars of the correctional system."

(Article continues)

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About EDJJ

EDJJ is a technical assistance, training, research, and dissemination center designed to develop more effective responses to the needs of youth with disabilities in the juvenile justice system and those at-risk for involvement with the juvenile justice system.

The center is a collaborative project of the University of Maryland, University of Kentucky, Arizona State University, American Institutes for Research, and The Pacer Center.

The data were obtained through regularly scheduled interviews with participants over the course of the five-year study. Todis and colleagues note three common themes from participant life histories. Prior to incarceration: (a) none of the families had well-established lines of communication between parents and youth; (b) most youth had very few academic credits and had stopped attending school by sophomore year; and (c) responses to initial and minor illegal behavior from the juvenile justice system were inconsistent and ineffective.

The youth in the study reported several components of the correctional facilities that they viewed as positive. These included structure, a regular schedule, existence of a positive behavioral program that allowed them to earn privileges, the availability of specific interventions (e.g., GED program, potential for earning a high school diploma, assigned jobs, targeted discussion groups), and development of a positive personal connection with an adult in the facility.

Many youth in the study reported insufficient support after their release from juvenile corrections. However, some youth identified behaviors of mentors that assisted them in their readjustment. Positive mentor behaviors included engagement (i.e., participating in activities with the youth), monitoring, consistency (i.e., following through with stated consequences), confrontation (i.e., frank discussions with the youth on his or her behavior), guidance, positive regard (i.e., conveying a sense of caring for the youth), allowing youth to work through mistakes, instrumental support (e.g., day care, transportation), modeling appropriate behavior, and maintaining a personal connection with the youth.

According to Todis, the most surprising result of the study was how little support there was from the juvenile or criminal justice systems for transition back to the

community. She explains, "It shocked us that the current accountability-based transition model has youth going back to situations that had never been successful for them in the past."

When asked what implications this study has on the field of corrections, Todis noted, "the need for a restructuring of transition supports to include assistance in housing, employment, and treatment is clear." However, she also identified the importance of continued research and emphasized the need for, "more long-term studies on the adjustment of youthful offenders."

Bonnie Todis is an Associate Professor in the Teaching Research Division at Western Oregon University. Michael Bullis is a Professor for the Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior at the University of Oregon.

^{1,2} For full text of study, see Todis, B., Bullis, M., Waintrup, M., Schultz, R., & D'Ambrosio, R. (2001). Overcoming the odds: Qualitative examination of resilience among formerly incarcerated adolescents. *Exceptional Children*, 68, 119-139.

Research to Practice

Promoting Literacy in Corrections

Illiteracy is a common characteristic among juvenile delinquents. A number of studies have explored the relationship between illiteracy and criminal behavior. Findings indicate that individuals with a low literacy level are at greater risk for criminal behavior and incarceration.¹

Youth involved in the justice system who are poor readers may have few long-term opportunities for training and employment. Poorly developed literacy skills may contribute to rates of recidivism that have been as high as 50 - 60% over the past 20 years.² Research shows that appropriate educational programming can reduce recidivism. Effective literacy

programs for incarcerated youth should:

- Use direct instruction in reading courses;
- Employ a rigorous reading emphasis in all academic and non-academic courses;
- Develop strong media and library facilities with a variety of appropriate resources;
- Monitor evening reading opportunities; and
- Solicit the support of volunteers to tutor students.

Implementation of these recommendations will provide youth with greater opportunities for success upon exiting juvenile corrections and has the potential for reducing the occurrence of re-offending.

¹Bureau of Justice and Statistics (1997). *Juvenile offenders and victims 1999 national Report*. Washington D.C.: National Center for Juvenile Justice U.S. Department of Justice.

²Boyce, C. J. (1994, July 15). For those behind bars, education is rehabilitation. *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. Paragraph 12; Center on Crime, Community, and Culture (1997). *Education as Crime Prevention* (Research Brief No 2); National Institute for Literacy (1999). *Helping equip America for the future*. Washington D.C.: Author.

³Drakeford, W. (In progress). *The impact of an intensive program to increase the literacy skills of incarcerated youth*.

FOR FURTHER READING

For additional information on promoting literacy in corrections, see Malmgren, K. W., & Leone, P. (2000). Effects of a short-term auxiliary reading program on the reading skills of incarcerated youth. *Education and Treatment of Children, 23*, 239-247.

Supporting Families

Supporting Youth at Arrest

Arrest of a youth can be a traumatic and confusing experience for an adolescent and his or her family. Juveniles with disabilities may face further difficulties due to emotional or learning disabilities and may respond inappropriately to police officers' requests and questions. To assist parents, JustChildren has developed a parent manual on several topics (e.g., school discipline, special education, mental health services) including what to do if your child is arrested. The following list of suggestions for parents whose son or daughter is arrested was adapted from the parent manual.

- **Try to see your child immediately.**

If you hear that your child is arrested you should try to see him or her right away. You should find out where he or she is being held and ask to talk to him or her. If the police will not let you see your child, ask to speak with the next in command. If you still are not allowed to see your child, send them a letter of protest, and keep a copy for yourself. You can then give a copy of the letter to your child's lawyer.

- **Tell your son or daughter to ALWAYS be polite to police officers.**

Swearing and arguing can lead to additional charges. *Yes, officer* or *No, officer* are appropriate responses to questions. It may be beneficial to practice these responses with your son or daughter through role-playing.

- **Remind your child that he or she should not talk to police without a lawyer.**

When raising your children, you probably tell them that if they tell the truth when they do something wrong, things will become better for them. Although this may be true at home, it does not always apply to conversations with police and prosecutors. If

your child is arrested, you should advise him or her not to say anything to the police or prosecutors until he or she has spoken with a lawyer.

Waiting for a lawyer is particularly important for youth with disabilities. These youth are at higher risk when they are picked up and questioned by the police because they may not understand the questions and may respond inappropriately. They may also impulsively blurt out misleading or self-incriminating information. Additionally, they may become anxious and appear guilty when under stress. Youth with developmental disabilities may give the answer they assume the authorities want to hear in an attempt to please others.

- **Remind your child that he or she should never write or sign anything when alone with the police.**

Youth, especially those with disabilities, need the legal guidance of a lawyer before writing anything down or signing documents.

- **Don't ask your child to confess to you.**

The only person your child can have an absolutely confidential conversation with is his or her lawyer. If your child tells you what he or she has done, the prosecutor could call you to court to be a witness against your child.

- **Provide information about your child's disability.**

Provide disability information to police, to your child's attorney, and to the court as soon as possible. Explain how your child's disability affects his or her behavior, understanding of the alleged offense, and ability to answer questions.

- **Make sure your child gets a lawyer.**

After your child is arrested he or she will probably go to court. At that time, the court will ask if a lawyer should be appointed to represent your child. Your child has the right to a lawyer, even if you cannot afford one. So, if you can't afford an attorney, make

sure you let the court know you would like one appointed.

- **Be careful what you ask for.**

Many parents are frustrated by their child's behavior and are relieved when he or she gets arrested, feeling that finally their child will get help. Some parents even ask the court to lock up their child. These same parents are often sad and troubled to see that their child gets punished and does not receive the anticipated services. Before you ask the court to send your child away, talk with people about other options.

Helping You Help Your Child (2001) is a handbook for parents produced by the JustChildren Program of the Charlottesville-Albemarle Legal Aid Society and paid for by a grant from the Virginia Law Foundation.

To view the entire manual, visit the JustChildren website
<http://www.people.virginia.edu/~cdj3z/rick/parentmanual.pdf> or contact JustChildren at (434) 977-0553

Prevention

Preventing Youth Violence and Aggression

The following article is adapted from an ERIC Document: Christle, C. A., Jolivet, K., & Nelson, C. M. (2000). *Youth aggression and violence: Risk, resilience, and prevention*. Washington DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 449632)

Youth aggression and violence in schools is decreasing.¹ However, high profile school shootings and media reports have prompted politicians, school officials,

and parents to push for action to prevent the recurrence of violent acts in schools.

Schools have commonly relied on ineffective and reactive approaches to violence including corporal punishment, suspension, and expulsion. In addition, policies such as *zero tolerance* and *adult-time for adult-crime* may actually exacerbate youth aggression and violence.² For example, youth who spend time in adult jails are more likely to be re-arrested for more serious crimes than those youth who are housed in juvenile facilities.³

Researchers⁴ have identified several components of proactive and effective violence prevention:

- Conflict resolution/social instruction
- Classroom strategies for preventing and responding to disruptive behavior
- Parent involvement
- Screening to identify students who are at-risk for school failure
- School- and district-wide data systems
- Crisis and security planning
- School-wide discipline and behavioral planning
- Functional assessment and individualized behavior plans

Several characteristics of proactive instructional models are also crucial to preventing youth violence and aggression. For example, school and community programs should be available to all youth. Establishing a partnership between schools and community organizations promotes shared responsibility for reinforcing positive youth behavior across environments and people. Through these activities and the teaching, modeling, and reinforcing of appropriate skills, schools and communities can provide a context for youth to learn and use appropriate behavior.

¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center on Education Statistics (2000). *2000 annual report on school safety*. Washington DC: Author.

² Leone, P. E., Mayer, M. J., Malmgren, K., & Meisel, S. M. (2000). School violence and disruption: Rhetoric, reality, and reasonable balance. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 33, 1-20.

³ Mendel, R. A. (2000). *Less hype, more help: Reducing juvenile crime, what works—and what doesn't*. Washington DC: American Youth Policy Forum.

⁴ Skiba, R. J., & Peterson, R. L. (2000). School discipline at a crossroads: From zero tolerance to early response. *Exceptional Children*, 66, 335-347.

Did You Know?

On average, it costs approximately \$6,000 to educate a student in an Illinois public school for one year compared to \$36,000 to incarcerate a youth.

Light, M. (2001, November). *Scoop from the Loop email newsletter*. For additional information, e-mail Ms. Light at m-light@law.northwestern.edu. To subscribe to the newsletter which focuses on zero tolerance policies and school discipline, make the subject line "subscribe to the scoop."

Your Letters

Dear Members of EDJJ,

As a teacher in juvenile corrections, I am concerned with the negative impact that parents commonly have had on youth involved in the juvenile justice system. For example, the mother may have taken drugs or alcohol while pregnant. Also, parents may have sexually, physically, or emotionally abused their child. What do you think about this negative influence of parents?

Signed,
A Concerned Teacher

Dear Concerned Teacher,

Thank you for your note. Parents can contribute to problems experienced by their youngsters. However, the experience of much of the EDJJ staff has been that the media, public agencies, and other groups too often scapegoat parents rather than offer assistance. For example, parents living at or near the poverty level may hold down one or more jobs. The hours and compensation make it difficult for them to attend school, mental health, or social service agency meetings during the typical 9:00-5:00 time frame. Because these parents are wage earners and not salaried, taking time off during the day means signing out or punching out and having a lighter paycheck at the end of the work week.

This scenario does not fit the experience of all families of youth involved in the juvenile justice system. However, as professionals, it is our responsibility to educate our students and be supportive of parents. This isn't always easy. Sometimes the agencies for which we work inadequately fund our efforts and make it difficult for students to succeed and their parents to participate. However, we can do our best to accommodate parent schedules, promote parental involvement, and view parents as partners and a valuable resource.

EDJJ does not provide legal assistance or attorney referrals. This section provides general comments and resources for parents, educators, and corrections employees related to educating juveniles with disabilities.

South Dakota to Close State Training School

Governor William Janklow announced earlier this month that he will close the State Training School at Plankinton by December 31, 2001. The facility, opened in 1888, was the focus of class-action litigation by the Youth Law Center during the past two years. The death of a teenage girl at the facility in 1999 sparked the initial investigation. The settlement agreement addressed conditions of confinement, treatment, disciplinary practices, and education services.

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