

Youth Crime and Anti-social Behaviour Consultation Paper

'Prevention – A Change in Philosophy'

Background

The following brief paragraphs outline proposals for a change in philosophy in order to help prevent youth crime, anti-social behaviour and re-offending rates.

The proposals are set against the underlying social and economic situation which has seen the growth of an increasing gap between those who have and those who do not. Young people used to make their way in the world by offering their labour to the work force. Now that we have outsourced much of the work to the developing world that labour is no longer needed. In this changed context young people find it much harder to make a contribution that is valued and therefore can, by some sections of society, be seen as being "dispensable".

Introduction

While youth offending and anti-social behaviour by young people continue to cause public concern and debate, insufficient acknowledgment of why young people behave as they do and what needs to be done to address it. Instead, there has been a steady shift of opinion (often driven by ill informed sections of the media) towards applying greater levels of punishment and control in the expectation that this will promote positive change.

The reality is that patterns of anti-social and criminal behaviour and long-term unemployment can only be interrupted by tackling the underlying causes. That is, until people are treated as unique individuals and it is understood that such behaviour is triggered by emotional, human and criminogenic needs, little will change. Punishment and threats by themselves fail to meet these fundamental needs and increasingly demoralises and de-motivates, re-enforcing personal self-doubt, fear and confusion, thereby perpetuating the situation.

It is advocated that education, housing and work are key factors in reducing such behaviour. Whilst undeniably true, it is not that simple. As re-offending rates and anti-social behaviour figures show, more fundamental needs are central to the process of individuals engaging in education, work and managing their personal lives. Until these are addressed, little will change.

Without a change in philosophy and approach, anti-social behaviour, social and academic exclusion and re-offending rates will continue to rise. Prisons will become increasingly overcrowded and rehabilitation more difficult to achieve.

Issues associated with drug misuse, mental health, social mobility, long-term unemployment and the fear of young people will continue to promote growing fragmentation within our communities. We will also continue to waste vast sums of money and human resources.

“If we don’t change our direction we are likely to end up where we are headed”

Chinese Proverb

Promoting Respect and Personal Development

Repeated research has shown that, owing to a wide range of negative personal experiences, the majority of disengaged young people lack the essential motivation, life skills, education, sense of self-efficacy and support to change. As a consequence they become dispirited and particularly challenging, displaying varying levels of disruptive behaviour, anger, frustration and disengagement. Many adults struggle to understand why.

The demonising of young people by sections of the media has tended to promote fear and an expectation that the majority of young people are bad and dangerous. Adults, particularly older people, are increasingly less likely to listen and engage with challenging young people. There is a growing communication breakdown. Young people often engage in behaviour that gets them into trouble precisely because they believe that the ‘adult world’ doesn’t listen to them, or take seriously the problems that they perceive they face. This has been one of the most common reasons given when young people were asked why they carried knives ¹. As a result, young people are often being left to find their own way, frequently floundering, making mistakes and inevitably face the consequences of failure.

In other words, in the absence of adults to turn to when faced with difficulties, they look to each other for support. In this situation, evidence suggests that they are three times more likely to commit crime. Despite this knowledge, insufficient recognition and effort is given to address these critical issues.

The challenge of trying to facilitate change in behaviour is also causing increased stress and anxiety amongst parents and professionals. Often criticised and depicted as failures themselves, many simply go through the motion, give up responsibility, or change jobs. The inevitable family breakdown, financial costs and lack of continuity in work with young people undermine the wider effort.

*“The truth is that change is easier to talk about than it is to do.
Execution is vital, and willingness is crucial”*

Unknown

To promote change, there must be a fundamental belief that everyone (staff, parents and young people) have worth and, notwithstanding those with profound learning disabilities, a capacity to change. That said, change is hard for everyone, often involving what are perceived to be significant losses – relationships and personal comfort zones. For many, both young people and adults, change can be so frightening that without intensive support, guidance and encouragement, they will resist what they see as a difficult and often painful process of moving on in their lives. Change involves a holistic understanding of the whole person, particularly the intrinsic links between our *thoughts, feelings and behaviour*.

Change the ‘thinking’ and the ‘feelings’, change the ‘behaviour’

¹ David Wilson - Professor of Criminology BCU

Each of us is made up of differing interdependent parts - physical, mental, emotional and spiritual elements. What happens to one part has a direct impact upon the others. In parallel with this is the need to constantly interact with everything else in our surrounding environment. To achieve maximum well-being and an integrative place within society, everything must function at its best. *If adults and professionals find this hard, how difficult must it be for young people lacking skills, confidence, support and a basic of sense of self-worth?*

Most of us have been fortunate to have grown up in a supportive and successful environment, the influences of which have helped to shape the way we are. For those who have not known such experiences, they are beyond their immediate comprehension. Yet we assume they understand and talk about such issues as though they do.

Critically, the lack of family support, poor education and well being, limited horizons and low sense of self-belief often result in some young people turning to the very things that keep them from realising any dreams and ambitions they may have; their reality is they know of nothing else. They become trapped in the cycle of a dysfunctional family life, unemployment, substance abuse and crime, living on the streets, sofa surfing or in prison. Their behaviour is a direct reflection of their associated *thoughts and feelings* at the time.

"You cannot speak that which you do not know. You cannot share that which you do not feel."

Jim Rohn

Similar weaknesses exist between and within the associated professions – poor communication and understanding of other's roles, competition, control and power, a lack of training and personal insecurities, all limit effective work.

Whilst not advocating that prison does not have a role for those who pose a danger to society, or that young people should not take responsibility for their actions, for the majority, greater levels of punishment and control fail to address the most fundamental human needs. To promote change, people need to experience a new and positive journey, learning to take responsibility with support and encouragement that was so conspicuously absent before and which most of us take for granted.

Attitudinal Change and Capacity Building

An Oppositional Stance

"Many offenders are not ignorant to start with. Rather they choose ignorance because it shows how forceful they can reject being told what to do by someone who doesn't understand where (to use the parlance) they are coming from"

Lynsey Hanley

Helping young people to change and achieve more productive lives is difficult work demanding understanding, empathy, patience, a range of interpersonal skills, personal confidence and time. It involves *'tough soft'* skills that address the *thinking, feelings and the behaviour*, all serving to motivate individuals towards taking increased responsibility for their lives.

Critically, it is about providing a safe environment which challenges and supports change. It is a process requiring meaningful communication, relationships with mutual respect, trust and understanding, recognising how a young person's experience to date, their perceptions, expectations, personal beliefs, fears and attitudes impact upon their behaviour. Importantly, it is about staying outside of the 'drama' and emotions that inevitably arise.

Embracing change is hard for us all, often involving a prolonged process of personal commitment, acceptance of responsibility, choices, overall personal well-being, the making of mistakes and dealing with setbacks. Setbacks must be viewed as temporary, with an acknowledgment that mistakes can and will be made (*we all make them*), but equally, they can be overcome. When viewed in this way, change can begin. The returns for the young person, those undertaking the work and society as a whole can be enormous.

"I didn't say it would be easy; I just said it would be the truth."

Morpheus

To facilitate such a process, those responsible for doing so often need to experience personal change themselves. Helping them to look at their own perceptions, responses (*thoughts and feelings and behaviour*) enables them to approach the task in a more open and congruent way. Through this personal learning they are more able to guide and empower others towards achievable goals and outcomes, encouraging them to celebrate their lives rather than losing them. Regrettably, as it stands, such staff training is often conspicuous by its absence, or at best inadequate. Instead the tendency is to rely upon punishment and retribution, written procedures, targets and bureaucratic 'managerialism', none of which address the underlying needs or causes.

Summary

To improve the quality of preventative work and the reduction of anti-social behaviour and offending, we need to see a radical change in a shared understanding and philosophy to the task. Those working with marginalised groups deserve and must be given the leadership (vision), training, encouragement and support to do the work effectively. Without such change, both professionals and those committing crime and anti-social behaviour will continue to *think, feel and behave* as they always have done; nothing will change.

"Powerlessness corrupts because it crushes our sense of what is worthwhile and possible"

Michael Lerner – American Psychotherapist

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