

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *The Effectiveness of Challenging Skills in Work With Young Offenders*

Trotter, C., P. Evans, et al. (2015). "The Effectiveness of Challenging Skills in Work With Young Offenders." *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*: 16

**Key Words:** Anti-social Behavior, anti-social statements, youth justice, supervision

### Summary/Conclusions

This article examines the effects of probation officers challenging anti-social attitudes and statements. Researchers observed 116 client/worker interactions by 46 youth justice workers. The interactions were coded for the number of times workers challenged their clients on anti-social views. The researchers also rated how the clients responded to the challenge. Researchers discovered that in 43% of the interactions, workers did not use skills to challenge thinking. When workers challenged anti-social views there was a positive response from the youth.

### Limitations of Information

The study used engagement as the outcome measure. It is unknown if the increased engagement led to increased outcomes. The study was performed in Australia. Cultural, demographic, and other population difference may produce different outcomes. Interviews were observed within the first three months of supervision. It is unclear how the results would change if researchers examined later interviews.

**Caveat:** The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

### Try challenging instead of confrontation

The present study out of New South Wales, Australia seeks to uncover the frequency, quality, and effects of challenging youth's anti-social views. In order to accomplish this, research workers observed 116 individual interviews between youth and 46 youth justice workers. Research officers observed interviews in order to determine the workers responses to anti-social attitudes. Workers were rated on a 5-point scale that ranged from 1, "not present" to 5, "present/worker intentionally uses the skill". Interviews were also tape recorded and scored by another research officer to ensure an acceptable level of inter-rater reliability. Researchers defined challenging skills as non-blaming, positive, and considerate of other's feelings. If a justice worker confronted a youth (e.g. blamed, shamed, exhibited hostility), the interaction would be coded as 1.

In 43% (50 of 116) of interactions between youth and workers, there were not challenging skills observed. In 19% of interviews, challenging was frequently or always present. Surprisingly, youths' responses to challenges were positive. According to the study, youth were more engaged when the youth worker asked about anti-social views, reframed anti-social statements into positive ones, or explored the thoughts behind a statement or behavior. The positive response also impacted overall interview engagement. When justice workers challenged anti-social views, the clients were observed to be more engaged throughout the entire inter-

view. Researchers also noted that when there were no challenge or workers confronted the youth, engagement after and throughout the interview was also rated lower.

### Practical Applications

- ✓ Don't ignore anti-social views. Respond to them by seeking to understand or reframe.
- ✓ Separate the behavior from the person. Address poor choices, thoughts and behaviors. Do not label the individual as being negative or unable to change.
- ✓ When challenging a juvenile's negative behavior or choices, remain neutral and take judgment out of the equation. Utilize MI skills to elicit change talk and praise actions/statements that move the client forward.
- ✓ Instead of confronting behaviors or statements, try asking what led up to the situation.
- ✓ Use SBC to target and respond to anti-social actions and behaviors. This will help create fair and neutral responses to behaviors.
- ✓ Utilize thinking reports, Carey Guides, and referral to CBT-based programs to decrease anti-social thinking and attitudes.
- ✓ Allow supervisors to observe your interactions with probationers for coaching and professional development. Staff cases when looking for suggestions on how to engage resistant clients.

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Jan. 2016