

# Developing Empathy for Adolescents in the Juvenile Justice System Who Are Preparing to Re-integrate into Their Communities

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Though reported cases of juvenile delinquency have been on the decline, the United States juvenile justice system (JJS) continues to process more than one million cases annually (Bouchard & Wong, 2017). Teenagers convicted of crimes and sentenced to a juvenile facility in the United States, live in a variety of settings, including group homes, residential dormitories, and staff-secured or hardware-secured lock-up units. Oversight of adolescents while in these facilities consists of intensive staff supervision with an adult decision-making structure. Many teens in these facilities think they will never leave the mandated JJS setting, but they do; often released with limited preparation for the “real world.”

The determination to place a young person in JJS, apart from family and community, is by design complicated. Adolescents in the JJS system, however, have exhibited behaviors that lead to a mandated commitment, including violating social and legal boundaries that the justice system views as inviolable.

Adolescents leaving JJS facilities are at a crossroads in their lives. While change is challenging for anyone transitioning into adulthood, adolescents in the JJS system have difficulties because of documented histories of abuse, neglect, and limited positive community experiences (Cuevas, Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2007). Their histories of sexualized behaviors, oppositional behaviors, and criminal activities make it difficult for these young adults to live and work in a community outside of a JJS facility without robust supports (Jain, et al., 2016; Pullman, et al., 2006). While they need support systems after discharge, the reality is that those

systems may be fractured, dysfunctional, or nonexistent (Mowen & Boman, 2017). In addition to other adjustments, adolescents leaving a JJS facility to return to neighborhoods where they must successfully resist the urge to return to illegal activities (Van der Helm, Stams, Van der Stel, Van Langen, & Van der Laan, 2011). Failure to do so places these adolescents at risk of violating probation and being returned to a JJS facility or incarcerated as an adult.

The reason for writing this paper was developed from my experience as an intern at a staff-secured, residential treatment facility and school for adolescent males who have been sentenced to the facility. The goal is to emphasize that group work can build skills at being empathic that are crucial to survival once the youth leaves the facility. Interventions at the site include an hourly, once-a-week therapeutic peer group facilitated by me and other staff clinicians. The adolescents in that group are the oldest on campus and are expected to be released from the program within the next six to 12 months. As these young men, aged 17-20, work towards their individual goals with staff, clinicians, and outside supports, this group provides a regular, constant interpersonal experience intended to help prepare for life outside the facility. For these young men, the concept of a positive group experience is difficult because their past trauma and current institutionalized treatment have left them without necessary skills to rely on others. With their re-integration into outside community looming, it is imperative that staff and group members understand the special needs of these adolescents.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The following studies relate to the development of empathy in adolescents who are in the JJS system. From these sources, several issues arise, including, the influences of parent-child attachment, adverse childhood experience (ACE), and family rearing practices in relation to the youth in the JJS system. Though the studies had different authors and aims, overlapping themes emerged. Each article makes a helpful contribution towards addressing the importance of developing skills of being empathic.

Successful community living is stronger when a person has the ability to be empathetic. Lack of empathy and anti-social behavior are observable in youth in the JJS (Leloux-Opmeer, Kuper, Swaab, & Scholte, 2016). Van der Helm, et al. (2011) studied the relationship between the lack of empathy and delinquency in adolescents and concluded that adolescent social difficulties in a community are related to the youth's capacity to

be empathic. The authors defined low empathetic response as the inability to cope in competitive environments, refusal to accept authority, and reluctance to help others, or in turn, accept help. Robinson, Roberts, Strayer, and Koopman (2007) made a similar conclusion that there is a relationship between the lack of empathy with anti-social attitudes and the behavior of JJS-involved adolescents. Their research revealed that adolescents in JJS had difficulty manifesting pro-social reactions to situations that required empathetic response. The youth in their study self-reported feelings of anger and aggression that interfered with being empathic.

Leloux-Opmeer, et al. (2016) found that difficulties in social-emotional relationships were notable in adolescents in residential placement, specifically as they related to their peers in the settings. The youth had difficulties trusting and respecting others. These authors noted that residentially placed youth tended to come from chaotic home environments characterized by poverty, abuse, and neglect. Barrett and Katsiyannis (2016) also noted that youth in JJS were brought up in environments of “family dysfunction” with adults who displayed anti-social tendencies. The youth had been impacted by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Katsiyannis, Whitford, Zhang & Gage, (2017) examined research on individuals who reoffend and were incarcerated multiple times. One of the common factors among repeat offenders was that the parent and adult figures in the home of origin displayed high incidences of impulsive and anti-social behaviors.

## **GROUP AS SOLUTION**

Youth leaving the relative protection of JJS need to prepare to successfully assimilate into the community. Van der Helm, et al. (2011) emphasized that empathy with others is a survival skill needed for a good post-discharge adjustment. Given that empathy is developed through good social relationships and mimicking other’s behavioral cues, an open and supportive group climate combined with adult support embodies empathy. Group therapy meetings with adolescents in JJS provided the opportunity for emotional growth and fostered positive social affiliation. Authors affirmed that peer-to-peer groups can offer adolescents the opportunity to physically be with individuals similar to themselves, who may understand them, and who offer a place of belonging (Matuleviciute & Vysniauskyte-Rimkiene, 2016). While the youth in the settings are engaged in group activities that occur naturally as teenagers hang out with each other, the guidance of an adult leader as one of the group

members should not be overlooked in the formation of groups for adolescents (Matuleviciute & Vysniauskyte-Rimkiene, 2016).

### **EMPATHY MODELED AND PRACTICED**

As children approach adolescence, hopefully they are ready for the intense involvement with peers. Developmentally, they should be ready to learn still again, in a new way, what it means to be human, alone with others. But it is never easy, and the skilled help and commitment of the adult world continues to be of vital importance. (Papell, 2015, Harder, Knorth & Kalverboer, 2016) wrote about the connection between adolescents and the role that group leaders play in modeling empathy. They note that adolescents seek out leaders who understand them. They also emphasize that having similar life experience was positive to youth. They state that youth in involuntary settings benefit from leaders who are not judgmental with them and who stay actively involved and interested in them. They stated that leaders who are sociable and appear to enjoy the company of youth helped the youth progress in their ability to manage group interaction.

Robinson, et al. (2007) noted that it is plausible to assert that adolescents must learn empathy and perspective-taking, as well as learn willingness to accept responsibility for one's actions. This can be accomplished by successfully resolving conflicts with peers and adults. Eriksson, Foy, and Trice (2001) wrote that being a member of a group offers the experience of bonding that is critical to traumatized individuals but may not be easily accomplished for the youth in residential programs. The authors wrote of the advantages of adolescent group therapy in helping to develop this.

### **PROTECTIVE FACTORS**

De Vries, Hovee, Stams, and Asscher (2016) studied protective factors in the community that impacted youth leaving the JJS. They found that attachment to others, both youth and adults, positively affected behaviors in adolescents and diminished aggressive behavior. They wrote that strengthening attachment with adults and adolescents lessens peer dependence and lowers the need for intrusive monitoring of youth by authorities and parents. Jain, et al. (2018) examined a JJS community re-entry program for adolescents. The authors found that continuity of care, which included community-based providers, was crucial to success outside of JJS. The authors stated that therapeutic services in the community were

a necessity for both adolescents and the support systems of individual youth. They reported that both the assessment of the individual's specific needs for assistance and then the coordination of supports following incarceration were beneficial to juveniles. Finally, Papell (2015) stated that group work is a dynamic and social process, important to adolescents. She writes that groups motivate people to learn about themselves and their role in community developed because of the treatment goals that pertain to human interactions.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The connections between a delinquent youth's abilities to be empathic and their level of empathy have been described previously. The key finding includes that the lack of empathy in delinquent youth is connected to lacking trust in others, lacking respect for the well-being of others, being prone to violating social boundaries, exhibiting anti-social behaviors, and violating rules (Barrett & Katsiyannis, 2016; Katsiyannis, et al., 2017; Van der Helm, et al., 2011; Vidal & Woolard, 2017). The value of relationships to youth in JJS with peers and adults was explored, with findings that indicated positive results. Open group experience fostered affiliation, perspective-taking, and empathy (Leloux-Opmeer, et al., 2016; Katsiyannis, et al., 2017; Van der Helm, et al., 2011). Finally, the connection between positive group work and later functioning as part of society was addressed by some authors (Barrett & Katsiyannis, 2016; Leloux-Opmeer, et al., 2016; Van der Helm, et al., 2011). The authors discovered that identifying empathy, considering the implications of living with empathy, and strengthening areas related to empathy in group work can be important to teenagers in the JJS.

Social workers in a clinical setting with youth involved in the JJS work with adolescents in a variety of ways, including designated group therapy sessions. The lack of empathy, and inability to function as part of group, place adolescents at higher risk for disrupted transitions from JJS to community settings. Specifically, assessing, identifying, and addressing issues connected to developing empathy in group therapy can strengthen youth in the JJS.

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