Kids locked up
(Minor revisions 2013 and 2015)

This paper has been written from the perspective of someone who enters the Juvenile Justice System as a guest to work with young people within that system. The comments are based particularly on my experience of running groups within that system in Australia over a number of years and in relation to a number of different content areas, including helping young people:

- Develop strategies for maintaining non-offending life-styles
- Manage drug use in life
- Develop strategies for reducing drug use which leads to offending behaviour.

An opportunity

While it can be argued (strongly!) that there are numerous disadvantages to young people being literally locked up, this time in their lives can also be viewed as an opportunity. It can be an opportunity to start to bring about changes in their lives which can lead to a greater quality of life once outside the system. Being incarcerated can mean:

- A temporary release from the tensions of their daily lives.
- A physical and emotional containing.
- A time-out period to consider and act on parts of their lives.
- Paradoxically, the environment can create an increased readiness or preparedness to explore new options. This seems true not only because of the above factors but because:
    - o Help, both physical and emotional is near at hand.
    - o Active offers can be made to the person. Offers to which the person would not otherwise be exposed.

To take advantage of this opportunity, young people within the Juvenile Justice system are likely to need help. The nature of this help is what this paper is about. Specifically it explores how to make the most of this opportunity within the context of a group programme.

Some key considerations

Choice. Because choice is necessarily limited in many ways for the residents of a Juvenile Justice institution, the idea of choice takes on a particular significance. It is one of the hopes for the young people within the Juvenile Justice system that they will make constructive and compassionate choices for themselves and for others once they leave the system. This often means making different choices to the ones they have made previously in life. How then does one learn to exercise choice in an institution which limits choice in many ways? Choice then needs to be built into a programme in as many ways as possible so that participants can develop the personal resources necessary for such action. Building choice into a programme is commented on below.

Grumpy customers. It hardly needs saying that prospective customers for a programme are likely to come ready to be bored, perhaps angry, perhaps aggressive. This is all true.

Interested customers. It equally may well be the case that people come with a readiness, for the reasons mentioned earlier, created by their presence in the institution. And also perhaps because what is offered may be a welcome diversion from other activities.

Some structural guidelines

When to hold the programme. This means working out some pretty obvious things but which somehow seem easy to overlook. Like making sure that:
- It doesn't compete with something else that is valuable
- Nor compete with something which might just be immensely attractive to the residents; such as a sporting event. This just creates resentment
- There is some consistency of time and day if possible
- Also if at all possible, that it fits with what happens before and/or after it.

Where to hold it. It is difficult to access reasonable spaces anywhere to run groups, but to have a space which has chairs stacked in the corner and desks pushed aside, suggests again that this process is not highly valued. It is equally unhelpful if other residents or personnel pop in and out to use lockers, make phone calls or make coffee! These interruptions also communicate that this process, and those involved in it, are not of value. The space simply needs to be adequate in size, clean and tidy, ideally with natural light and air, and with appropriate furniture. I feel compelled to add here that I am not a big fan of bean bags. Yes, I know they are comfortable, and I know they are nice to flop into. But it really can be difficult developing a meaningful relationship with someone who is at right angles to you!

Attendance. Once established, it is important that the programme does not play second best to the other demands of the institution. If people have to meet with counsellors, medical staff or other workers; these meetings need to be arranged to fall outside the hours of the programme. Pulling people from a group to attend something else not only disrupts the group process but devalues the overall event. It is difficult for participants to respect something not respected by those around them.

Deciding who has what responsibility. Workers involved in the programme need to be clear about their roles. As a guest, and especially if there is a person from the institution sitting in (which I am happy for) I find it really useful to know who will do what. For example, if there is a knock at the door to ask a group member to attend an appointment, it needs to be totally clear as to what action will take place (hopefully a polite refusal to allow this) and it needs to be clear who will (probably privately) make this refusal. This will usually be the JJ worker while I continue the group. A sign on the day which says 'Group in Progress'. Please do not disturb', is not a bad idea.

Building the programme itself. Some significant ingredients

Reflecting that which it seeks to instill. If a programme seeks to encourage people to respect others, then the process must respect the participants. If it seeks to encourage self control then there must be opportunities for this to occur within the programme. If, as commented

above, choice and decision making are being developed, then there must be opportunities for these processes within a group. These must also be genuinely present and not just expressed verbally.

Setting group rules-or not? The notion of rules is an important one in considering the above issue. I often do not set rules. I know this is unusual and I am quite happy to set rules if the group members or co-worker wish to do so. In considering whether rules are the best way of achieving this, it is useful to consider the participants and their context.

- Participants are already likely to be exposed to many other rules, usually fixed by someone else, these being something out of their control and not of their making. This is not the climate needed in many groups
- Some of the participants are likely to be angry, annoyed, frustrated, bored or aggressive from other events within the institution or prior to their arrival in it. Rules do not often contain these feelings nor the attendant behaviours. What is needed is a process which will allow for these to be present in a non-destructive way
- Some participants are likely to bring with them compelling life issues about which they have strong feelings. Here again they may not always be readily able to manage these issues in accordance with rules
- Rules will not guarantee success. Having the rule 'no insults' written up on the wall will not guarantee respect
- Some of the group are likely to be accustomed to, even attracted to, the idea of breaking rules. The spirit of a rule can be broken while actually obeying the rule itself. A look, a gesture, a tone can be just as an actual voiced insult
- Rules can become an obvious target when emotions run high when addressing difficult or sensitive issues. Rules become 'something to break', and a way of departing from a difficult moment.

Establishing and maintaining positive group dynamics. It is the establishing of a productive creative and respectful process which I consider to be of the essence. The setting of rules or not, can be determined after a consideration of these questions.

- What atmosphere needs to be set so that this group can do its work?
- What are the issues that need addressing at the beginning?
- And as the process develops:
- What are the mechanisms in this group, for managing:
    - Pain
    - Misunderstanding
    - Difference
    - differences of opinion
    - conflict
- What are the mechanisms for promoting:
    - Exchange
    - Challenge
    - risk taking
    - understanding
    - compassion
    - joy and humour

Confidentiality. This issue is continually discussed and so deserves a specific comment here. Groups certainly need guidelines on which to proceed, they need structure and a respectful

process. It is our job to help create this process. At the beginning of a group I will often discuss the idea of confidentiality. Rather than asking that people not discuss the group, I offer them three suggestions. Firstly, that the group is going to be so fantastic that they will want to tell everyone about it! Secondly, if group members don't want us to know things, don't tell us. Thirdly, if people do offer us something personal about themselves, it is reasonable to be respectful of that. This process is quite different from the setting of rules. It is a respectful discussion about how we might proceed. This discussion needs to be complemented by a process which builds in a level of privacy as well as carefully creating moments where mutually respectful exchanges are possible. Such an atmosphere I feel, is much more productive than the setting of rules, for a journey which may be at times, emotionally difficult and risky.

Building choice into a programme. Choice can be built into a programme in two simple ways:

Attendance. The obvious way is for a person to be able to choose whether or not they attend a programme. Of course this runs the risk of a person choosing not to attend. But this is the nature of choice. Constant coercion does not help a person learn how to make a choice. However, for a choice to be made meaningfully a person needs to be aware of just what it is that they are making a choice about. Consequently, an effective way of doing this is to 'invite' (the invitation might be very forceful) people to attend the first 20 minutes of a programme, at the end of which they may make a choice whether to stay or leave. This puts the responsibility with the worker to create an interesting, engaging and useful process. Not an unreasonable responsibility.

Attendance- Building Choice. Having made the above comment, I acknowledge that it will not always be the case (or even desirable) that every person will be permitted to choose, nor is it always necessary that they do. But whether they choose to attend or are compelled to, choice can still be built into the process of a programme. People can choose particular issues/topics they wish to explore, which parts of important life moments they will offer others, and their vehicle of expression at any one time, whether for instance if it is verbal or non-verbal, through a physical action, a drawing or single word or phrase. The context is one of containment, and yet these are real choices. They are real exchanges, real processes, even though they are taking place within an institution.

Don't ask people to do anything that will set them up later. There are relationships which exist outside the programme; roles, positions. Having a rule about confidentiality will not necessarily guarantee that what happens within a group will not go outside it. But because you may still want to work on important and personal issues, there are productive ways of doing this which ensure some safety, including writing or drawing in privacy, asking people to keep details of stories to themselves but share the theme of what happened, and by asking people to think about rather than talk about, intimate aspects of their lives.

Providing some distance, and some safety. The language used can suggest some distance: '*Imagine that you are...* ' Or: '*What if...*' Or: '*If you do decide to...*'

Maintaining privacy. It is not necessary for all the details of people's lives to be made public for issues of sensitivity and importance to be addressed. People's responses can be discussed rather than their actual life events. (See the later example).

Finding the fit. This idea is of importance to every group, but has particular importance here because of the context. The process, the activities, strategies and language used within it, need to actually fit for the participants. Sensitivity from a person may not be revealed by

their choice of words or by physical affection. It may be shown in an act of kindness or generosity. It is important that such things are not defined by the expectations and the social and personal background of the social welfare/youthwork fields. This is a challenge to the creativity of the worker who may come from a different culture or social grouping to participants, to find ways of creating a process which fits for the participants but equally one which extends them and takes them to new possibilities of themselves.

Inviting Success. Success is motivating, encouraging. Its reverse is not.

Language The language used at all stages and points in this process, including the language used with the participants, that used in discussions with JJ staff and any descriptions of the programme, has, I believe, a significant impact on the way a programme is conceived, delivered and received. Thinking or talking about young people as 'non-compliant' or 'defiant' does not seem optimistic nor constructive. It is the task of those of us who run programmes to create a process which will fire the imaginations of the participants. It is not up to them to 'comply' with our wishes. Saying to participants; 'you have to be here so let's make the most of it' hardly sounds like wild enthusiasm. As workers we need to genuinely enjoy, be excited by, take seriously and responsibly, the programmes we present. We can be totally genuine when we say to the participants that: 'You really are lucky to be here. You will have a great time. It may be tough at times, fun at times, and sometimes the energy might even drop if we are off our game, but we guarantee to commit our utmost to making it worthwhile. And our hope for this programme is that it will change all our lives.'

Participants expressing success. Our expectations about how our participants respond to this life changing experience need to be realistic. Expressions of success may not always be in polite middle class terms. Nor even in words. In fact we may well have to create opportunities for people to give us some feedback about the whole event. And possibly to do so without speaking. (through for example, 'theatre', or drawings or cartoons).

I was taken by the actions of a young man who was on an order (thus compelled to attend the group), but who was not actually locked up. After spending some sessions on looking at ways of being more in charge of his life, he reported that he had got fed up with his boss at work and had told his boss to help with the cleaning up. To my delight, the young man wasn't given the sack but his boss actually helped him. I'm not sure if it was wise to extend the idea of taking charge to actually telling the boss what to do. But what was good was that the young man did actually exercise his own judgment and decided to act. He made a choice and was certainly more in charge of his life.

Peter Slattery