

Key components of high-quality child-centred casework in youth justice

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Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth justice services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth justice services.

This report was kindly produced by Andrew Day and Catia Malvaso who have been working in partnership with Youth Justice in South Australia to develop case management processes and practices that are more trauma-informed and child-centred. Influenced by this work and the wider research literature, they assert that youth justice practitioners will be the most effective agents of positive change when they successfully engage children and young people with a focus upon: (i) listening carefully; (ii) helping justice-involved children and young people to feel safe; and (iii) working in ways that promote positive and rewarding experiences. These three components align to the growing evidence regarding the importance of building meaningful relationships, developing trust, working collaboratively and with compassion, responding effectively to developmental needs (recognising childhood adversities, trauma, and disadvantage), and building upon strengths. Examples of how the core tasks of engagement can be put into practice are then outlined, reflecting the ethical, professional, and practical imperatives for this work, with attention also given to how some of the challenges that might arise in a youth justice context can be addressed.

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The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation

1. Introduction

This Academic Insights paper has been written at a time in history in which youth justice services are going through significant change (see Kilkelly, 2023). Practitioners are increasingly being expected to reflect on the very philosophy that underpins their work and then to identify ways of working that effectively balance the goals of managing risks of reoffending and ensuring the wellbeing of vulnerable children. This has led, at times, to cynicism and confusion both within the sector and among external stakeholders about what the best approach to casework looks like, with some youth justice managers and practitioners reportedly subscribing to the view that 'a lot of so-called new practice is actually a rebranding of old, proven practice' (Case et al., 2020; p.227), and others feeling that they have received 'confusing and conflicting messages' (Day, 2022). In this paper, we identify key aspects of casework and case planning when working with justice-involved children and young people. We welcome efforts to utilise these skills, and argue that, by doing so, we can make progress in uniting the field, and simultaneously contribute to the wellbeing of children and young people and the broader goal of enhancing public safety.

Driven by the findings of multiple reviews and investigations into the quality of youth justice services, both in the United Kingdom and internationally (e.g., Clancey et al., 2020; Taylor, 2016), calls to adopt ways of working that are more 'individualised' and 'child-centred' (see Case and Hazel, 2023; Youth Justice Resource Hub, 2022) have grown louder and stronger over recent years. This is supported by a growing body of evidence that clearly demonstrates that justice-involved children and young people have experienced significant – and often ongoing – childhood adversity, trauma, and disadvantage (see Malvaso at al., 2021 for a systematic review of more than 120 studies). This requires youth justice practitioners to develop a deep understanding and appreciation of the different ways in which these experiences influence children's developmental pathways and shape their current behaviour, as well as to ensuring that they avoid responding in ways that re-traumatise. The extent of 'crossover' of children between child protection and youth justice systems is now also well-documented (Baidawi and Sheehan, 2019; Hunter et al., 2023; Malvaso et al., 2017), highlighting the need for coordinated and more individualised care for dual-system involved children with current and historical experiences of abuse and neglect.

And yet it is not always obvious – at least in terms of everyday practice – what a child-centred approach actually involves. To help address this gap, we draw on a paper recently published in the journal *Child and Youth Services* (Day and Malvaso, 2024) that talks about the need to go 'back to basics' in youth justice casework. We have also been influenced, however, by our consultations with youth justice practitioners and children and young people in our local youth justice service in Australia (Malvaso and Day, in press) who have consistently told us how important the relationship formed between the child or young person and the worker is for successful outcomes (what they often referred to as 'engagement'; see also <u>Academic Insights paper 2025/01</u> on an evidence-informed model and guide for effective relational working in youth justice). We make the argument that youth justice practitioners will be the most effective agents of change when they can successfully engage children and young people in the case management process, and that this is most likely when their approach to casework is purposeful and framed around three simple ideas – listening to justice-involved children and young people, helping them to feel safe and to avoid re-traumatisation, and working in ways that promote positive childhood experiences.

2. Engaging justice-involved children and young people

2.1 The importance of engagement

The involvement of children and young people in case planning and their active participation in the casework that follows is widely considered to be critical (e.g., Hampson et al., 2024), and there is evidence that considerable importance is attached to the relationship that the child or young person is able to form with the worker.

A range of different views have been expressed about the interpersonal approach that case managers and workers should adopt. The most appropriate approach will, of course, inevitably depend on how the role of the youth justice practitioner is conceptualised – whether this be primarily in terms of order administration and compliance (see Academic Insights paper
2023/04), or perhaps in relation to risk management and criminogenic intervention, or of advocacy and support. There have been suggestions, for example, that it is always important to develop a strong emotional connection with the child or young person, whilst others argue that it can be preferable to be more emotionally detached. Nonetheless, there is broad agreement that effective practice relies on the ability to relate well to the child or young person, and that developing trust and finding a way to work cooperatively are defining features of high-quality casework.

Just what it means to 'relate well' in this context is, however, not always completely obvious – it might, for example, be argued that 'mentoring' is too easily confused with 'befriending' and that this is unhelpful in so far as it increases dependency and reduces self-efficacy. Conversely, a lack of emotional connectedness, or even an aggressive and intimidating interpersonal style, may lead to antipathy, disengagement, and non-compliance (see Kozar and Day, 2012). There is a need to somehow strike a balance between being personable and being purposeful, or between what Skeem et al. (2007) describe as the provision of both 'care and control'.

It is here that the concept of the *therapeutic alliance* can help us to understand some of the most important features of any helping relationship (Bordin, 1979). The alliance comprises three inter-related elements:

- *goals* that speak to the very purpose of the relationship
- tasks which are the specific activities that need to be undertaken to achieve the goals
- bond the development of an emotionally trusting relationship.

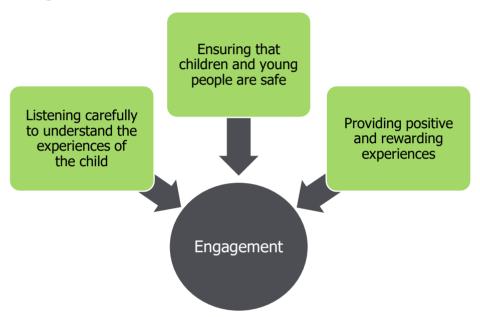
In psychological therapy at least, there are now numerous studies that provide evidence of a moderate, but robust, association between the formation of a therapeutic alliance and treatment outcomes across a wide range of individual interventions (see Martin, Garske, and Davis, 2000).

In our view, the concept of the therapeutic alliance is a helpful way to think about engagement, particularly in criminal justice settings where the goals of the relationship are typically imposed by the court and may or may not be congruent with those of the child or young person. We would argue, however, that before the goals of any service contact can be agreed (or negotiated) in order for the actual tasks that make up the case plan to be identified, it is important firstly to develop the bond. In fact, we believe that engagement of this type is a necessary (and, at times, even sufficient) condition for meaningful case plans to be developed that have the potential to have long lasting impact.

2.2 Three components of engagement

This idea of 'therapeutic alliance' resonates strongly with the 'Alliance' component of the 'IDEAS' framework, put forward by Dix and Meade in their <u>Academic Insights paper 2023/05</u>. This is a framework that is based on three themes relevant to effective practice: the behaviours, values, and personal qualities of the worker; the professional knowledge base, reflection, and curiosity that they bring to the work; and the 'what of the work and how to do it'. The IDEAS acronym is used to communicate how these themes might be implemented in practice.¹

Our framing of the core tasks of engagement is, however, based on the very simple idea of doing three things well:



It is immediately evident that each of these is intentionally focussed on promoting the strengths of the child and runs counter to the caseworker adopting a position of power and expertise. We also see possibilities to accommodate a better understanding of the impacts of structural injustice by adopting a child-centred approach based on the three components. By this, we mean recognising the shortcomings in how the harms experienced by children and young people have been responded to over the course of their lives (or inequalities in how this has been done).

Listening well

Our first key element of practice is concerned with the interactional style of the worker. The importance of *listening* to those in the justice system is now widely accepted and is supported by evidence that collaboration is a key component of effective supervision (Bonta and Andrews, 2010), with the ability to be 'non-blaming' also identified as a core practice skill in youth justice (Trotter, 2013). In addition, the intentional use of listening to promote personal reflection and

¹ Influence (practitioners to explore and become aware of their role and how it is defined in law), **D**elivery (professional tools and systems that support practice), **E**xpert (knowledge and theory), **A**lliance (the ability to develop trusting relationships with children and their personal and professional networks), and **S**upport (encouraging and supporting resilience in staff).

help with the development of new personal narratives is considered critical to the process of desistance (Farrall and Calverley, 2006).

The ability to listen draws on the idea of *compassion* – a defining characteristic of all human service delivery (see Gilbert, 2014). The first step in developing compassion is to cultivate curiosity about the child as an individual; something that, as a minimum, involves understanding the significant histories of maltreatment and adversity that justice-involved children and young people will typically carry with them, and which often places them at ongoing risk of harm. Listening carefully to the experiences of those who continue to experience racism and discrimination, whose language, culture, and practices are not valued by society, and who experience other challenges resulting from structural inequities (see Scott and Jenney, 2022) is also, in our view, central to any effort to engage.

Ensuring safety

Listening carefully to justice-involved children and young people is one way to create an emotional environment in which they can *feel safe* and better able to trust both the worker and the service. In fact, many of the most important elements of safety are relational. Safety is a feeling that can be nurtured when people are treated with respect and are allowed to maintain dignity – they are not dehumanised or labelled, and not required to continually re-tell their 'story' with no choice or opportunities to provide feedback.

To be experienced as 'safe', the worker must be seen as *trustworthy*. To achieve this, it is important to not offer assurances that engaging with youth justice will always be helpful. It is not always possible to resolve the presenting issues (see Goldenson et al., 2022), especially when limited time is available (e.g., when children are serving short orders or have outstanding court matters). In this respect, *transparency* is very important.

Another element of casework that can contribute to a sense of safety is the way in which *conflict* is resolved, whether this involves prevention, de-escalation, or crisis management. Challenges arise here in attempts to balance the safety of staff with those of children and young people, particularly in residential or institutional settings. It follows that the physical environment should be welcoming and comfortable, with options to respond to escalations in both emotions and behaviour. These may be both physical (e.g., access to withdrawal areas, alarms, lockable doors), as well as administrative (e.g., ensuring staff are not working in isolation), and can be related to training (e.g., developing skills in recognising and diffusing escalation). There are, of course, also numerous 'small' opportunities to promote safety by providing children and young people with *choices*. These might include choices about where to sit, offering breaks as needed, and making basic comforts available, such as tissues and water.

Finally, it is important to remember that power differentials will be magnified when assessing individuals who are incarcerated and/or come from marginalised backgrounds, and where the need to listen carefully and provide opportunities for choice and collaboration is key (e.g., cultural humility, see Lekas et al., 2020).

Providing positive childhood experiences

Our third and final way to promote engagement is to actively facilitate access to *positive life events*, be they positive school/work experiences, supportive relationships with peers and family, involvement in structured activities such as sports/leisure groups, and/or engagement with cultural activities. These are opportunities and environments that promote resilience and strengthen positive pathways into adulthood (see <u>Academic Insights paper 2022/04</u> on systemic resilience). They also allow modelling and reinforcement to take place, which are the

caseworker skills that have the strongest associations with reduced reoffending (Trotter and Evans, 2023).

McGregor's (2017) analysis of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with case managers (from nine different non-government organisations in Australia that work with justice-involved children and young people) highlights some key aspects of practice that can facilitate effective engagement. All of the participants, for example, said that it was 'doing the fun stuff' that brought about the most significant change for children and young people. In addition, there is a growing body of research showing the beneficial effects of positive childhood experiences. They are, for example, associated with lower levels of psychopathology and improved wellbeing, and have been shown to promote adaptation when there is a history of childhood adversity (Bethell et al., 2019). In other words, the simple provision of positive life experiences can have reparative effects and promote resiliency going forward.

2.3 Putting it into practice

Table 1 illustrates some of the ways that the core tasks of engagement can be put into practice. This list is not exhaustive but serves to provide some examples of how a service might build on the ideas laid out in the previous section.

Table 1: Facilitating meaningful engagement between youth justice practitioners and justice-involved children and young people

Practice domain	Ways to strengthen practice
Listening	 Provide youth justice practitioners with training in in basic counselling skills to respond more effectively to what children tell them – either explicitly or implicitly through their behaviour – they need. Encourage child and young person participation in collaborative activities where they are invited to discuss their experiences and share ways that services might be improved (e.g., formalising exit interviews to invite practitioners to hear how services have been received rather than making assumptions about engagement).
Promoting safety	 Invest in ongoing training for youth justice practitioners to improve capacity and competence in realising and recognising the way that adversity and trauma impacts behaviour; this could include psychoeducation to improve both child and practitioner understanding of what a traumatic experience is, how experiencing trauma affects them, and how trauma-related symptoms are perpetuated long after the event has occurred. Support practitioners to respond effectively to signs and symptoms of trauma; this could include training in the use of universal trauma screening for referral on to specialist trauma-focused assessment and evidence-based interventions, as well as upskilling in the provision and modelling of coping skills and positive behaviour support. Support practitioners in advocating for children and young people, particularly when working with other service providers, as well as the broader community, to facilitate a more sophisticated and accurate understanding of how adversity, trauma and disadvantage can combine to create the situations and circumstances that precipitate children's offending behaviours.

Practice domain	Ways to strengthen practice
Providing positive experiences	 Invest in training for practitioners to administer assessments relating to positive childhood experiences (e.g., the Benevolent Childhood Experiences scale; Narayan et al., 2018), with the potential for domains to be adapted and used to structure case plans so that practitioners can routinely and purposefully work towards goals in these areas. Support family-inclusive practice and strengthening relationships with significant others (friends, teachers) to support case planning and interventions within children's broader networks and identify opportunities to broker access and entry into other supportive services that offer positive experiences.

2.4 Some challenges

The challenges associated with efforts to engage children and young people in any justice system response are widely acknowledged. These arise in a context in which the child's history of contact with government agencies and the complexity of their presentation will inevitably influence their readiness or capacity to collaborate with, or to trust, the caseworker. In South Australia (the jurisdiction in which we live and work), for example, our research shows that four in five justice-involved children and young people in both community and secure settings will not only report more than four different adverse childhood experiences, but also that they typically experience ongoing, clinically significant symptoms of trauma (Malvaso et al., 2022; 2024). The starting point for engagement has to be a strong understanding of the psychological context that sits behind their initial presentation.

What follows are simply illustrations of some of the challenges that may arise in this context – issues requiring practitioner awareness – as well as some preliminary suggestions for how best to approach the task of engaging children and young people.

We are better at engaging some people more than others

Our first example relates to the considerable *diversity* that exists – both in and between – the groups of children who receive youth justice services. As a result, any particular approach that we adopt will suit some better than others, and some workers will be better at working with a particular child or young person than others will be. The case managers that we spoke to told us that it was unusual for them to meet children and young people who arrived at their first session fully engaged and enthusiastic about the work ahead (Malvaso and Day, in press). Different styles and approaches will be needed, for example, to work with those who are 'withdrawn', or perhaps 'fatigued' from multiple experiences of case management, from those who are 'fearful' and may come across as aggressive, and those who appear 'disinterested' or 'defensive'. For those who come across as 'avoidant', 'untrusting' and who provide 'limited self-disclosure', it can be useful to think about whether they are simply scanning the environment for *threat* and, if so, how the most appropriate response will often be to offer reassurance by being gentle, caring, and calming.

At the same time, we would suggest that there are common aspects of effective practice when working with those who have a personal history of abuse and/or neglect (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Logical therapeutic responses to trauma (adapted from Middleton, 2011)

What do children with histories of abuse or neglect experience?

Absence of boundaries
Double bind communications
Rejection
Chronic uncertainty
Lack of safety
Lack of trustworthy individuals
Lack of respect
Maintenance of family secrets
Use of threats/intimidation
Sexualised behaviours
Exploitation
Never experiences apologies

What would a case management response to engage these young people look like?

A further point for consideration is that some children and young people may be 'easier to like' than others. The issue for the caseworker here is about not choosing to only work with those with whom they can empathise more readily, but to work hard to engage every child or young person who comes to the service. Jones et al. (2024) have written about this in terms of the professional bias that can sometimes arise when working with people who have experienced trauma. They suggest that 'it is much easier, perhaps, for professionals to accept the presentation of trauma when it involves flashbacks, nightmares, and/or physical symptoms – such as feeling sick or being in pain. However, when trauma is expressed in terms of violence or aggression it can be less easy to maintain sympathy – especially in circumstances where our personal safety is threatened' (p 3). They go on to observe that certain types of traumatic experience may even be perceived as more worthy of services than others, and how this has the potential to influence how the practitioner responds (e.g., through requests for someone to repeatedly detail 'what happened' when they committed their offence). Reflective practice and supervision has an important role to play in ensuring that biases of this sort do not influence casework practice.

Working with those who simply don't trust us or what we do

Understanding the importance of *trust* is key to any effort to help people. For example, considering a young person's willingness to view new knowledge gained from the caseworker as trustworthy and relevant, and, therefore, as worth using in their lives (Jones et al., 2024). Mistrust may result when there is a history of betrayal or systemic lack of transparency, or when a sense of 'what is true' is undermined by placing prohibitions on acknowledging the truth. Related to this, of course, are the histories of inadequate responses from agencies that the child or young person brings with them (whether this be from school, police, or child protection), as well as the injustice of not being believed, or, worse still, of being accused of telling lies. It should be anticipated that a significant dynamic will arise when children feel that they are not believed – the risk of repetition of not being listened to, or even simply the fear of

it happening again, may be a real barrier to engagement. This will often result in children and young people presenting themselves in particular ways (such as being less truthful) that make it harder for the youth justice practitioner to listen.

Finally, it is not uncommon for children and young people to simply not have trust in the ability of a youth justice agency to offer any meaningful help (Malvaso, Robinson, and Day, in prep). In such circumstances, case managers tell us that the ability to engage and build rapport is even more important (Malvaso and Day, in press). Youth justice agencies can also promote trustworthiness by ensuring they have mechanisms in place that privilege the views of children and young people and that invite and allow them to participate in the development of planning of services. This includes implementing transparent complaint and feedback management processes, as well as formally consulting children about the types of services and programmes they think are needed (see also <u>Academic Insights paper 2021/10</u> on supporting children's meaningful participation in the youth justice system).

The administrative burden and role clarity

One of the most common messages coming from the youth justice practitioners that we worked with, was about the challenges they experience finding sufficient time to work with every child or young person on their caseload (Malvaso and Day, in press). Caseworkers told us about how the demands for court reports/updates are simply overwhelming and how they take priority. They spoke about increases in administration and workloads (with limited resources/staff), and how when they feel 'under the pump' or 'stressed', that their focus turns to the most immediate tasks (e.g., court appearances). In these circumstances, they have limited time to listen and connect with the child or the young person, or to offer the care that is needed to make them feel safe and provide a positive experience. This is summarised in the following quote from one case manager we spoke to:

"Some of the best supervisions have been when I've spent a few hours with a young person helping them with something such as opening a bank account. Having that quality time to build rapport, demonstrate pro-social modelling and seeing the young person feel great after sorting something like that out, helps set up the rest of the working relationship".

Our conclusion from this is that there is a need to recognise workload as a significant barrier to effective engagement, as well for each practitioner to think carefully about, and plan, an engagement strategy for every child or young person that takes account of what is possible. Part of the challenge here also concerns the need to clearly define the role of youth justice practitioners and to provide clear policy and practice guidance that can support them in prioritising child-centred and trauma-informed approaches. This may help to resolve the confusion, and sometimes cynicism, expressed by those in the field (see Case et al., 2020; Day, 2022). Another way to develop more consistent practice is to clearly define and measure 'success'. In a child-focused youth justice service, this will not only mean measuring administratively important outcomes such as mandate completion or recidivism, but also indicators of whether a child's sense of safety and wellbeing has improved over the course of supervision (Day et al., 2023; see also Academic Insights paper 2022/02 on social impact measurement).

3. Conclusion

In this Academic Insights paper we approach effective youth justice delivery in terms of specific aspects of practice that can help to engage children and young people. The three elements of casework we describe here can be reasonably expected to help children and young people to:



feel heard



feel safe



develop more optimism about their futures.

The experience of being encouraged and supported should, in turn, lead to the development of a stronger bond between the child or young person and the caseworker, that can then be used to collaboratively set the goals and tasks of the case plan, including those that relate to statutory obligations.

We believe that casework that is predicated on these ideas can help to avoid what Case (2021) has described as 'conceptualising and explaining offending by children as the product of identifiable, quantifiable 'deficits' and flaws within the individual that can be targeted, treated and allegedly corrected through youth justice sentences and interventions'. Importantly, our 'back to basics' approach also respects the ethical, professional, and practical imperatives for youth justice practitioners to do better in responding to the developmental needs of justice-involved children and young people, especially in relation to the intersections between maltreatment, trauma and justice system involvement.

We would like to finish with some very practical questions that can be asked of every youth justice worker to help to ensure that their practice is both individualised and child centred:

- What emotions are you hoping that this child or young person will experience during their interaction with you and other members of the youth justice agency?
- How do you plan to inspire optimism, hope, self-efficacy in this person?
- How do you want to help this child or young person to feel more included with regard to both their order/supervision and to society at large?

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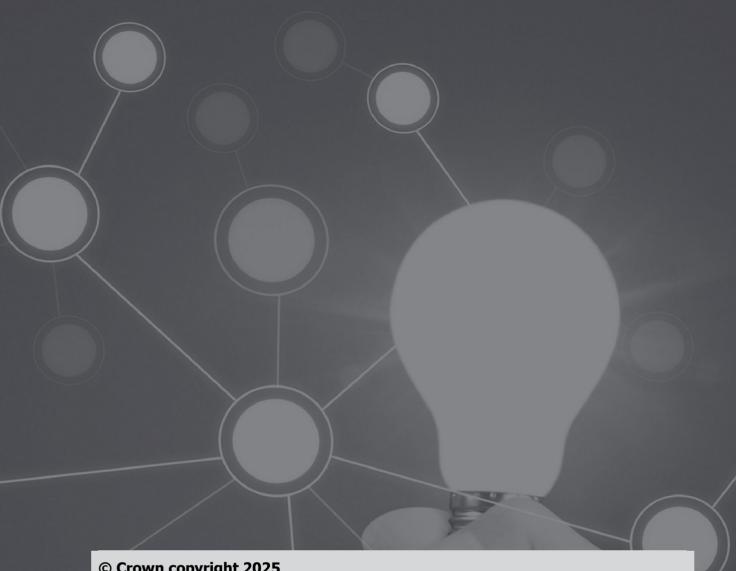
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