Progressive desistance practice in youth justice

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Contents

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 Alexandra Wigzell and Claire Paterson-Young, reflecting upon the existing desistance literature – much of which has focused upon adults – and its application to children. They set out key requirements for the application of *progressive desistance practice* in youth justice. First, it should be recognised that the relevance of desistance thinking to children's lives is context dependent and will mean quite different things for different children. Second, caring professional relationships must play a crucial role and be prominent within policy and practice – and we must also care for our practitioners and managers. Third, desistance should be seen as a social justice issue, with non-stigmatising socio-structural support facilitating children's pathways away from offending. Finally, a child-focused understanding of desistance should be centred on fostering healthy long-term development, moving beyond a narrow focus on reducing offending.

Within the inspectorate, we develop and review our inspection frameworks in line with the latest evidence and learning. Notably, there is much alignment between the components outlined above and the youth inspection standards framework implemented in Spring 2025. The framework encompasses the importance of developing and maintaining relationships with children, accounting for context and structural factors as part of a personalised approach, and achieving opportunities for change, participation and integration.

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1. Introduction

In the past three decades, desistance – understanding how individuals move away from offending – has gained significant attention in research and policy, becoming an 'increasingly ubiquitous' focus within the justice system ([Maruna and Mann, 2019](#)). Since 2014, concepts from desistance theory, initially developed with adult offenders in mind, have been applied to youth justice in England and Wales. This shift raises important questions about the relevance and suitability of adult-oriented desistance frameworks for children in the justice system, particularly given that much of the existing desistance evidence is rooted in adult experiences.

Despite acknowledgement of the challenges of applying desistance thinking to children, there exists only a small international body of research exploring desistance pathways for children. It primarily focuses on those defined as 'serious' or 'persistent' offenders, limiting our understanding of how these theories might apply more broadly across the youth justice population. This creates a notable gap in research that is especially pressing as desistance thinking becomes more widely applied across the full range of youth justice interventions in England and Wales, including out-of-court disposals, which now make up nearly half of youth supervision cases. Even among children under court-ordered supervision, 85 per cent have minimal or no recorded history of offending (Youth Justice Board/MoJ, 2025). Added to this, the evidence is that most children's offending careers are limited to adolescence, implying that desistance for children may be more of a normative developmental process rather than an exceptional behavioural change (Moffitt, 1993).

This gap in research was considered by the National Association for Youth Justice (NAYJ), resulting in an edited collection *Desistance and Children: Critical Reflections from Theory, Research and Practice* (Wigzell, Paterson-Young and Bateman, 2024) which offers critical insight into desistance within youth justice. It is grounded in the view that children should be seen primarily as children, distinct from adults, in policy and practice. The book considered:

- what helps children to move away from offending?
- to what extent is the concept and theorisation of desistance useful to explaining this during childhood and adolescence?
- does the application of desistance theories risk problematising rather than normalising children's behaviour?
- how is desistance thinking understood, interpreted and implemented in youth justice policy and practice?

This Academic Insights paper draws on critical aspects of the book and an earlier article (Wigzell and Bateman, 2024), outlining reflections from existing literature on desistance, the application of desistance thinking in context, the role of care in professional relationships, socio-structural support, and healthy development. This paper, as with the editorial collection, offers a diverse perspective with regard to the debate on desistance with children. Thus, the paper encompasses perspectives from those who argue that desistance should not be applied to children at all (see, for example, Johns, 2024; Little and Haines, 2024), and others who believe it can be relevant but critique its implementation and development specifically when it comes to children.

2. Desistance and children – key research messages

Desistance thinking: development and central themes

Desistance is a relatively new and growing area of research, having only been popularised in the early 1990s. Since this time, thinking about desistance has developed significantly. The starting point for this work is the widely-established phenomenon – known as the age crime curve – that most adolescents who start offending do eventually stop: offending peaks during adolescence and then dramatically declines.

Early research and ideas about desistance understood it as an inherently natural process correlated with aging (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990) and the associated physical, physiological and psychological maturational processes (see, e.g. Glueck and Glueck, 1974). Other early explanations highlighted the role of individual agency, viewing offending and its termination as the consequence of rational choice decisions (Cornish and Clarke, 1985). Later research focussed instead on the importance of socio-structural factors to pathways away from offending, including employment and family formation (Laub and Sampson, 2001, 2003).

From the late 1990s, research attention turned to the significance of identity or cognitive change to desistance, emphasising the behavioural implications of how people see themselves (Maruna, 1997, 2001; Giordano et al., 2002; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). More recently, research has highlighted the situational and spatial aspects of desistance, noting that stopping offending entails people spending time in places that are inconsistent with criminality, and in turn, the environmental fabric positively shapes how people see themselves and think about who they want to be (Farrall et al., 2014). The latest addition to thinking is relational desistance, which recognises that agency, identity and socio-structural factors are shaped in interaction with others (Bottoms and Lanskey, 2023; Weaver, 2016). Linked to this, relationships with significant others, including professionals, have been shown to play a critical role in inspiring motivation to desist, hope, and improved self-worth (Rex, 1999; Healy, 2012, Leibrich, 1994).

While differing emphasis may be placed on these ideas, desistance is now commonly understood as interactional: movement away from offending flows from maturation, cognitive change, agency, socio-structural factors, and relationships. Against this backdrop, research increasingly emphasises the critical role of political, economic and social conditions in shaping many of the above factors, and thus people's opportunities for desistance (Bottoms and Lanskey, 2023; McNeil and Nugent, 2016; Farrall et al., 2010). Also, a growing body of desistance research with women, minoritised groups, and in the global South has shown that, despite many commonalities, there are subtle variations in desistance experiences by gender, ethnicity and jurisdiction (see, for example, Graham and McNeill, 2020; Calverley, 2013; Wigzell et al., 2024; McIvor et al., 2004).

Research on desistance and children

While desistance research has predominantly focused on adults, a number of studies have examined the desistance pathways of adolescents (for a detailed overview of this work, see Wigzell et al., 2024). The message from this body of research is that although (as one might expect) similar factors are relevant to adolescent desistance as to adults, there are important potential differences and areas of uncertainty. For example:

- there is mixed evidence about the role of identity shifts in adolescent desistance

- different types of socio-structural support and changes are likely to be associated with children's (and young adults') desistance, compared to older adults (for example, parents and carers may play a more significant role for adolescents)
- such support may be more important to adolescent desistance given that their age and status may render teenagers less capable of exercising agency and power
- positive professional relationships, a central plank of adult desistance thinking, may be especially important for adolescent desistance given that that this is a formational (and thus malleable) stage of identity.

In summary, it should not be assumed that the lessons from desistance research with adults apply equally to children.

2.1 A context-dependent approach

A key message from the narrow evidence base about children's desistance is the importance of a context-dependent approach. This goes beyond tailoring approaches to children's needs (although this is evidently important). Rather it is concerned with taking a critical approach about how desistance principles may apply differently to individual children, rather than assuming that they are relevant (Wigzell and Bateman, 2024). This thinking has emerged from research findings about the role of identity development in children's desistance.

Most recently, Wigzell and Bateman (2024) examined the relevance of identity shifts to children's desistance, drawing on research interviews with 73 youth justice-involved children (on court-ordered community and custodial sentences) across two studies in England and Wales (Wigzell, 2020; Day et al., 2020).[1] Their analysis found that children demonstrated quite different narratives, which they categorise into four broad 'groups' (see Table 1). These categories are not intended to suggest that children neatly fall into discrete groupings with corresponding implications for desistance intervention. Instead, they illustrate the varied starting points, circumstances and trajectories of youth-justice involved children. On this basis, Wigzell and Bateman (2024) contend that identity has very different relevance to children's pathways away from offending, with different support required.

As Table 1 shows, for the 'conformists' there is a subtle cognitive shift insofar as it is about adopting an identity of independence; the crucial role for services is to not interfere with this natural maturation process. For the 'uncertains', the faltering nature of their self-identity may mean that criminal justice contact runs the risk of reinforcing doubts about self-worth, particularly when it is experienced as deficit focused, offending centred and stigmatising. A central concern of youth justice services (YJSs) may therefore be to recognise and foster their incipient pro-social self-identity, as part of a wider focus on healthy child development (moving beyond the negative aspiration of reducing offending). For the 'shifters', their stories of an active decision to 'become' the best versions of themselves with the support a professional who 'believed in' them, underlines the centrality of positive working relationships in fostering hope, self-agency and self-belief (Bateman et al., 2013; BYC, 2017; Haigh, 2009). And finally, for the 'survivors', for whom offending provides a sense of value, safety and control over their lives – and is woven into their identity, at least in the short term – significant, sustained and consistent practical and relational support is likely to be needed to enable them to relinquish the safety of a survivor identity and attempt desistance (Wigzell and Bateman, 2024).

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[1] It should be noted that neither of these research studies were designed to explore the relevance of identity shifts to children's desistance pathways, but they nonetheless provide useful data for developing understanding of children's experiences and narratives, and their role in desistance.

Table 1: Desistance 'groups' in youth justice (Wigzell and Bateman, 2024)

Group	Offending history	Nature of offending	Narrative of offending	Starting self-identity	Self-identity development and behaviour trajectory	Perceived role of YJS in pathways
Conformists	0 -1 prior out of court disposals	Criminal damage, assault	Due to immaturity – a 'silly mistake'	Positive self-identity	See themselves as having 'grown up' and put offending behind them	No support with desistance felt to be needed
Uncertains	1-2 prior out of court disposals	Violence	Uncontrollable anger, Internalised shame	Faltering self-identity	Continuing uncertainty about who they are and might become – can see both possible positive future self and negative offending future self (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009)	Despondent about the YJS's capacity to help
Shifters	1 or more prior convictions	Robbery, domestic burglary, assault, PWITS	Adversity and involvement in the YJS seen as a 'wake-up call'	Faltering self-identity	Focused on 'becoming' the best version of themselves. Express optimism and aspiration for future. Want to 'give back' to society (Maruna, 2001)	YJS worker helps them to feel 'believed in' and hopeful for their future
Survivors (custodial sentence)	Multiple prior convictions	Violence, robbery, domestic burglary	Offending provides status, belonging and sense of control	Identity embedded in offending	Emphasis on self-reliance. Focused on day-to-day survival rather than future. Self-identity change perceived as a risk to safety and survival	Emotional detachment and resistance to support due to fear of disappointment

International research knowledge similarly indicates that identity may play a differing role in children's desistance pathways. This primarily encompasses interview-based research with justice-involved children across a range of jurisdictions (for an exception, see Droppelmann, 2017). Several themes are evident:

- some research indicates that there are different types of 'desister', with a minority describing an overt identity shift or transformation (Bugnon, 2015; Murray, 2009; see also BYC, 2017; McMahon and Jump, 2018)

- several studies note that subtle changes in outlook, indicating cognitive change, often play a role in children's desistance stories; for example, they might describe their new-found maturity or discontent with offending (BYC, 2017; Haigh, 2009) – but importantly they may reject the idea of an 'identity shift' in their desistance (BYC, 2017)

- some research has found that children frequently do not see themselves as offenders and resist such labels, engaging in a type of 'identity work' to maintain this (Droppelmann, 2017; Murray, 2009) – for example, Murray (2009) describes a desister group who minimise their offending, which enables them to retain a non-offender identity; she accordingly argues that interventions aimed at making children take full responsibility for their behaviour may be counterproductive.

It should be noted that recent research with adults suggests that identity shifts may play a differing and perhaps even a diminished role in desistance pathways of different 'groups' (see for example, Farrall and Shapland, 2022; Godwin, 2022). In addition, some scholars reject the relevance of identity change to children's desistance (Little and Haines, 2024).

What then might this mean for youth justice practice? Some argue – in line with Youth Justice Board (YJB) policy – that practice should be concerned with supporting children's pro-social identity development, but crucially this should not assume the existence of an offender identity from which to shift (Hazel and Case, 2024: 38). Others caution about the benefits of a youth justice practice focus on identity development and instead advocate an emphasis on nurturing children's long-term healthy development (of which identity is just one potential part) through caring relationships (Wigzell and Bateman, 2024).

2.2 Caring professional relationships for all

The importance of positive professional relationships in supporting children's engagement and desistance is now increasingly well recognised in the youth justice research and policy literature (YJB, 2022), following a period of abeyance (for comprehensive recent reviews, see Fullerton et al., 2021). However, there has been less attention given to the critical role of genuine 'care' in such relationships, and the need for institutional and structural support to realise them.

The missing ingredient? The importance of 'care' in professional relationships

Over the past ten years, a small but growing body of research has highlighted the centrality of 'care' in the youth justice professional relationship (Fullerton et al., 2021; HMI Probation, 2016; Nugent, 2015; Phoenix and Kelly, 2013; Bateman et al., 2013). This echoes the findings from social work, youth work and probation (De Boer and Coady, 2007; Harris, 2017; Lewis, 2014). For children, having a worker who they perceive as genuinely caring for them and their welfare is key to fostering trust, meaningful engagement and a range of positive outcomes, including desistance. Staines et al. (2024), focusing on interview findings with 40 professionals working with girls in the justice and care systems, also draw attention to the role of such relationships in modelling alternative identities, improving self-confidence and raising aspirations, echoing similar findings with girls in custody (Bateman et al., 2013).

Recent research with justice-involved children has found that genuine care is shown by:

- 'going the extra mile' (i.e. doing more than one is required to do)
- showing interest in children and their lives beyond their offending (e.g. remembering the name of a pet) – children want to feel that they matter and are not just another 'case'
- 'persistent presence' – this is not about always being available, but instead about consistently turning up for children, both practically and relationally, even when it is challenging
- doing what you say you will do and being transparent if this is not possible (Wigzell, 2020; forthcoming; see also, Evans and Szifris, 2024).

As Brierley (2021) compellingly argues on the basis of lived and professional experience, relational practice 'takes more than being genuine, honest, open and inclusive', it also requires a human connection that fosters trust (see also O'Meara Daly et al., 2025).

Linked to this, research suggests the benefits of relational support that is responsive to children's needs and timeframes (Johns, 2024), rather than being provided within a set period. Evans and Szifris's (2024) interview-based research with eight YJS-involved child/worker pairs

in a voluntary sector organisation, points to the crucial importance of investing *time* in relationship building and allowing *flexibility* to continue contact with children beyond the time-limited youth justice order. While acknowledging that this is enabled by the non-statutory context, they call on YJSs to consider learning from this as part of prioritising relational practice. Staines and colleagues (2024) also highlight the need for working practices that offer flexible relational support. However, they note the risks of fostering relationships that encourage dependence, particularly given the justice context. They argue that meaningful relational support should be available earlier and outside of the youth justice system.

Despite the importance of caring relationships, practitioners will know from experience that they are not a 'magic bullet'. Although they can support children's hope and self-worth, as well as being a source of practical help, they alone cannot overcome the structural inequalities and difficulties that have shaped children's criminality and criminalisation. Accordingly, it is important that a focus on caring relationships is accompanied by advocacy to ensure that children's entitlements to services and rights are met (Gray and Smith, 2024).

Institutional and organisational care: caring for professionals

There is a critical need for institutional and organisational practices to realise and support caring relationships. Too often relational work is seen as something that just naturally happens, akin to breathing. Whereas perhaps relational practice is better understood as both an aptitude or orientation, as well as a craft that requires support, nurturing and critical reflection.

To aid thinking about this, we draw upon care ethics, a strand of moral philosophy, which contends that people's moral decisions are guided by their feelings or responsibility to care for others, alongside the self. Care ethics dislikes rule-based approaches to decision-making, instead emphasising attendance to context. The value of care ethics is that it offers a framework for identifying the qualities and conditions of caring relations and evaluating whether 'good care' is being provided. Tronto and Fisher (Tronto, 1993), key architects of care ethics, argues that 'care' comprises four interconnected elements:

Caring about	Recognising that a need exists for which care is necessary.
Caring for	Assuming some responsibility for identifying the need and determining how it should be responded to. i.e. service providers and managers.
Care giving	The direct provision of care, i.e. face-to-face practitioners.
Care receiving	The response and experience of the care receiver to care, i.e. service users.

Understood in this way, care cannot be reduced to the relationship between the professional and child but is part-and-parcel of the wider institutional and organisational context. Unpacking this further, we highlight several points from Tronto's (2010) work. First, Tronto (2010) emphasises that good care depends on those receiving it to perceive it as caring; this underlines the importance of listening to service users about their needs and experiences (for insights about involving youth justice-involved children in decision-making, see Smithson and Gray, 2021; Creaney et al., 2024; Wainwright 2024). Second, good care is reliant on institutional and organisational processes that facilitate care: 'when care givers find themselves

saying that they care *despite* the pressures and requirements of the organisation, the institution has a diminished capacity to provide good care' (Tronto, 2010: 165; own emphasis). This points to the need for caseloads, case management systems, assessment procedures, training and professional development, and governance processes (such as inspection) to recognise and support relational practice. Of relevance here is Hampson's (2024) call for a review of AssetPlus due, in part, to its lacking relational focus and time-consuming nature (Carr, 2024, also argues for a change in sentencing to aid relationship development). Third, good care requires care for those engaged in care giving; one cannot care well or be attentive to the needs of others when stretched too thinly, depleted, or disillusioned oneself (Tronto, 1993, 2010). This is made plain by Staines et al., (2024) who highlight the need for adequate working conditions to reduce staff turnover, which undermines the development of stable professional relationships with children and impedes desistance. However, it goes beyond this: a 'commitment to care should infuse the whole organisation', with managers and practitioners showing care to one another (Dominey and Canton, 2022: 427).

Finally, Tronto (2010) argues that good institutional care must involve spaces for professionals to reflect on the quality and delivery of care and resolve the inevitable conflicts and problems that arise in the process of caring and meeting people's differing needs. It is not enough for managers and practitioners to have caring intentions (Dominey and Canton, 2022). For youth justice, as a minimum, this points to the importance of regular opportunities for meaningful reflective practice and clinical supervision, which are too often absent or tokenistic. As Tronto (2010: 169) advocates, 'organisations that provide care [must] also care about their own ways of working'.

2.3 Socio-structural factors

A guiding concern is the role of structural factors and inequalities in shaping children's abilities to desist from offending. Too often, these are neglected in discussions about youth justice, with a focus instead on individual factors, which risk locating the causes of children's offending in personal shortcomings (Gray and Smith, 2024; Wigzell and Bateman, 2024)

The evidence is that the socio-structural context surrounding children can impact their ability to desist (LeBel et al., 2008; Evans et al., 2023), as these elements shape the environments where children live, learn, and grow. Children in low-income neighbourhoods can face daily challenges such as food insecurity, unsafe play areas, and exposure to neighbourhood violence, all of which can disrupt healthy development and make it more difficult for them to avoid behaviours perceived as delinquent (Sharkey and Faber, 2014). When children lack basic resources, this can impact on the building of trusting relationships, securing meaningful education and employment opportunities, and health (Green, Richard, and Potvin, 1996). Additionally, schools in high-poverty areas often have limited resources, larger class sizes, and fewer support services, which can hinder a child's learning experience, reduce their engagement, and make them feel disconnected from positive social and educational opportunities that might otherwise help them thrive (Laub and Sampson, 2001; Barry, 2007; Barry, 2010). Structural challenges with families and school are compounded by factors such as gender, with Sharpe (2024) arguing that the experiences of girls and young woman in school, social care and criminal justice act as interconnected and reinforcing sites of punishment. Sharpe (2024) argues that children's future opportunities are harmed by the cumulative effects of negative labelling, exclusion, and othering.

Children's social environments and neighbourhoods can deeply influence their capacity for desistance, with children strongly affected by the social norms and behaviours they observe in

their communities, which can shape their own beliefs and actions. In neighbourhoods with high crime rates, children may see offending behaviour normalised or feel pressure to adopt it as a survival strategy (Farrington and Loeber, 2000). This exposure can increase the likelihood of antisocial behaviour, especially if children lack stable role models or access to prosocial activities and spaces (Farrington and Loeber, 2000). Such adversity is compounded by other factors, with Wainwright (2024), examining the intersecting experiences of poverty, racism, educational exclusion, and contested experiences for children of Black and mixed heritage. These intersecting experiences can result in otherings, labelling and criminalisation which impact on opportunities for desistance (Wainwright, 2024). Positive influences, such as supportive neighbours, community programmes, and local mentors, can play a crucial role in encouraging children to engage in constructive activities and view prosocial behaviour as achievable and rewarding. Indeed, Creaney et al. (2024) offer insights into the role of peer support and mentoring in providing meaningful connection, practical support and raising aspirations, in turn facilitating desistance.

The resources and support children have available through their families and communities can have an impact on desistance, with research emphasising the role of social bonds formed during the transition to adulthood, such as shifts away from offending peers, family formation, and employment (Laub and Sampson, 2003). This 'socio-structural maturation' process (Bateman, 2020) is complex and may impact young people differently based on gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic background. Graham and Bowling's (1995) study with children and young adults in England and Wales highlights this complexity, indicating that social factors tied to adulthood, like leaving school or forming families, are more associated with desistance in young women than young men. Staines et al. explain that girls in the care system experience a 'triple whammy of negative stereotyping based on their gender, care status and alleged offending behaviour' (2024: 113). A revolving door of state and institutional professional responses and disrupted professional relationships exacerbate girls' criminalisation and may impede their desistance (Staines et al., 2024).

By addressing the socio-structural conditions that contribute to children's desistance, communities can create environments where children have the chance to achieve their capabilities and lead positive, healthy lives (Sen, 1999; Paterson-Young et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of ensuring children's entitlements are met, such that they have genuine equality of opportunity and outcomes (Williams and Daniel, 2021). The idea of entitlements, used by the Welsh Government, relates to children's access to ten universal provisions, including education, sports, health, housing and consultation about decisions affecting them. It aims to maximise children's access and outcomes, and is contrasted with a rights-based approach that establishes minimum standards for children (Haines and Case, 2015).

2.4 Healthy child development

We propose that a child-focused understanding of desistance with children should be centred on fostering their healthy long-term development, moving beyond a narrow focus on reduced offending. We term this *progressive desistance practice,* nurtured through stable caring relationships and non-stigmatising socio-structural support (Wigzell, Paterson-Young and Bateman, 2024; Wigzell and Bateman, 2024; see also Wigzell, 2021). Hazel and Case (2024) explain that similar ideas are at the heart of their Child First conceptual framework, in which children's positive outcomes are the primary goal and desistance follows as a secondary outcome.

Healthy development among children, particularly those at risk of or involved in offending behaviours, are closely linked to multiple interrelated factors including family relationships, emotional regulation, and prosocial engagement. Research shows that children who develop secure attachments with their caregivers tend to have higher levels of emotional stability and resilience, which in turn supports positive developmental outcomes (Lee, Moon and Garcia, 2020; Paterson-Young et al., 2019). Secure attachments help children feel safe, understood, and valued, fostering trust and reducing impulsivity or negative reactions when faced with challenges (Paterson-Young et al., 2019). Positive family relationships provide a foundation for children that, when supported by peer relationships, participation in school activities, and structured recreational environments, serve as essential elements for healthy development through consistent reinforcement of prosocial behaviour. Caring professional relationships are also important here, as discussed earlier.

Desistance from offending behaviour, or the gradual reduction, typically relies on protective factors that counterbalance adversity such as family instability, poverty, or exposure to violence (Laub and Sampson, 2001). Laub and Sampson (2001) highlight the importance of strong family and social supports in promoting desistance. As children grow, educational success, employment opportunities, and mentorship relationships become additional protective factors. Structural changes in children's lives – such as moving to a safer neighbourhood or gaining access to quality education – also facilitate desistance by exposing children to positive social norms and reducing interactions with individuals involved in offending behaviour. Importantly, research illustrates the need for sustained access to supportive resources that help children navigate these social transitions effectively (Piquero, Farrington and Blumstein, 2007).

In recent years, there has been much criticism of the fetishism of programmes as the answer to children's offending (Haines and Case, 2015; Wigzell, 2021). However, the evidence is that they can offer benefits when child-centred, non-stigmatising and delivered alongside or within socio-structural support. Stephenson (2024) demonstrates the benefits of arts-based educational programmes for children in conflict with the law, including enhanced self-belief and self-efficacy. Trivedi-Bateman (2024) outlines The Compass Project, which seeks to support children's desistance by creating opportunities for exposure to law-abiding, positive and fulfilling choices. Additionally, meaningful participatory engagement with children has proven benefits in helping children shape decision-making processes, which can in turn support desistance (Creaney et al. 2024).

Creating stable and supportive environments, whether through family and community support, education, and/or or professional relationships, is essential to promoting desistance. Supporting children's individual capacities and potential, in conjunction with broader environmental and socio-structural factors, can offer pathways for sustained healthy development, helping children transition successfully into adolescence and adulthood (Piquero, Farrington and Blumstein, 2007). There should be emphasis on designing provision centred upon:

- wellbeing in schools and the community (Sharpe, 2024; Staines et al., 2024; Rosier, 2024)
- services that can respond to the diverse needs of children and young adults (Staines et al., 2024; Wainwright, 2024)
- structures that support rather than hinder desistance (e.g. criminal records disclosure rules and welfare benefits conditions; Sharpe, 2024).

These solutions require statutory services to engage in participatory processes (Creaney et al., 2024) and with innovative services and/or programmes (Stephenson, 2024; Evans and Szifris, 2024).

3. Conclusion

This paper has examined recent contributions to knowledge about the application of desistance thinking with youth justice-involved children. There are several key messages:

Context	The relevance of desistance thinking to children's lives is context dependent and will mean quite different things for different children. We illustrated this in relation to the place of identity in children's desistance, demonstrating that it plays a varying role in children's pathways away from crime.
Relationships	Caring professional relationships play a crucial role in supporting children's desistance and should be a principal focus of youth justice policy and practice. Importantly, if we want practitioners to build caring relationships with children, we must also care for our practitioners and managers.
Socio-structural supports	It is clear that desistance is a social justice issue, with non-stigmatising socio-structural support fundamental to facilitating children's pathways away from offending.
Long-term healthy development	If desistance thinking is to be appropriate to youth justice, we advocate an emphasis on children's long-term healthy development, moving beyond a narrow focus on reducing offending. We term this child-focused theorisation *progressive desistance practice*.

Our collaborative work on desistance and children also indicates several key research gaps. First, we argue that more needs to be understood about children's pathways away from crime across the spectrum of youth justice-involvement. Related to this, research should consider the desistance needs and experiences of different 'groups' of children (while recognising that each child is unique). Second, there should be research attention to how desistance thinking is being understood and translated into practice with children (across the range of agencies involved) and its impact. With this in mind, it is important that research is designed and delivered with children and young adults with youth justice experience (Wainwright, 2024; Creaney et al., 2024). And, finally, research should be mindful of the structural, economic, and political conditions that shape children's pathways out of the youth justice system.

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