



Her Majesty's
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Collaborative Family Work in Youth Justice

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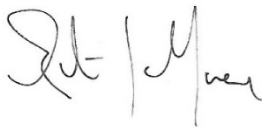
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Foreword

HMI Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth offending 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 offending services.

This report was kindly produced by Professor Chris Trotter, highlighting: (i) the links between family relationships and criminal behaviour; and (ii) the research evidence on the effectiveness of family interventions for children in the criminal justice system. The paper focuses upon the *Collaborative Family Work* approach, designed to be undertaken in the family home by youth justice workers either individually or with the support of another worker. A collaborative problem-solving approach is employed with a number of strength-based activities and deliberate reinforcement of pro-social comments and actions. The research findings have been positive, particularly for those who successfully undertake the work at home. The wider implementation of family work is thus recommended, accompanied by further research and evaluation to enable the underpinning evidence base to continue to grow. Within the Inspectorate, we will continue to examine the sufficiency of the focus upon developing positive family relationships when inspecting youth offending services.



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Professor Chris Trotter is Emeritus Professor at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. He worked for many years in youth justice, child protection and adult corrections, in Australia and UK, prior to his Monash University appointment. He has undertaken many research projects and published widely on the subject of effective practice with involuntary clients, particularly those in the criminal justice system. He has an international reputation for his work in relation to pro-social modelling. He has published nine books including *Working with Involuntary Clients*, now in its third edition, and published in multiple languages, in addition to more than 100 articles, book chapter and reports. Professor Trotter is Director of the Monash Criminal Justice Research Consortium. He can be contacted on christopher.trotter@monash.edu

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HMI Probation.

1. Introduction

Poor family environment, including child abuse and neglect, family criminality, family disruption, and severe family conflict are background factors for many children (and adults) involved in the justice system as evidenced in a large number of research studies (e.g. Katsiyannis et al., 2018). Family issues are also the concern of both adult probation and youth justice practitioners and others who provide community supervision. Two studies of community supervision, for example, found that family issues were the most, or at least one of the most, commonly discussed issues in interviews with both children and adults (Bonta et al., 2008; Trotter and Evans, 2012).

There is also considerable support for the effectiveness of family interventions for children in the criminal justice system. Petrosino and colleagues (2009), in a review of the available research, found that family-based interventions have considerable impact on reoffending. They suggest that, on average, children involved in family-based interventions have recidivism rates 16% to 28% lower than comparable control groups.

This is consistent with a detailed review by Lipsey and Cullen (2007) who considered four different meta-analyses on the effectiveness of family interventions for children, and found an average reduction in recidivism compared to untreated control groups of between 20% and 52%. Hartnett et al. (2016) and Petrosino et al. (2009) argue, based on their reviews, that family interventions may be more effective than other interventions for children facing family issues. Hartnett et al. (2016), for example, argue that family work is more effective than cognitive behavioural and group therapy interventions.

Support for family interventions is also provided in earlier reviews by Latimer (2001) and Dowden and Andrews (2003), although both reviews suggest that the effectiveness of family interventions is dependent on the nature of the intervention which is offered; the interventions need to be consistent with evidence-based practice principles.

Despite the research support for family interventions, they seem to be relatively rare in criminal justice settings. Specific interventions focused on issues such as drug treatment, anger management or employment are more common. Where family interventions are offered in youth justice, they tend to be delivered by licenced therapists trained in specific models such as multi-systemic family therapy or functional family therapy (Hartnett et al., 2017; Markham, 2018).

In this paper, I focus upon an example of a project that uses youth justice workers to deliver a family intervention – *Collaborative Family Work*. This work is designed to be delivered as part of the routine offerings of a youth justice service.

2. Collaborative Family Work

2.1 The approach

Collaborative Family Work (Trotter, 2013) is designed to be undertaken in the family home by youth justice workers either individually or with the support of another worker. It is usually conducted over about six sessions but may be as short as a single session if this is appropriate. The model has been used in Australia and the UK in youth justice and in non-government organisations which offer services to children in the criminal justice system (Trotter, 2013; Trotter, Cox and Crawford, 2002; Trotter, Evans and Baidawi, 2020).

The model involves working through a six-step problem solving model:

- 1) the youth justice workers ask the family members to identify and agree on ground rules for the conduct of sessions
- 2) they then help participants to identify issues of concern for them or things they would like to change
- 3) the family members then decide which issues or problems to work on first
- 4) they reach agreement on goals
- 5) they explore the issues in some depth
- 6) they develop strategies to achieve the goals.

Workers use the acronym RIDGES to remind them of the six steps:



The intervention also includes a number of strength-based activities and deliberate reinforcement by workers of pro-social comments and actions by both children and family members. Rating scales are used to monitor the progress of the family against problems which have been identified and against general family functioning. The sessions often include exercises such as: (i) role playing on alternative methods of family interaction; or (ii) providing structured opportunities for family members to provide positive feedback to each other.

2.2 Evaluation findings

A recent study was conducted of the delivery of the intervention by the state youth justice department in the western region of New South Wales in Australia (Trotter, 2017; 2020). Prior to undertaking work with families, juvenile justice workers received training in the Collaborative Family Work model. Workers then identified children with family issues and, usually with the support of another worker, offered the family work to a child and at least one other family member. They were supported by debriefing panels after each family work session. The region was not provided additional resources or staffing to undertake the family work.

Throughput numbers were as follows:

- 45 children and their families agreed to be involved in the research project (the family work and the research)
- 31 families completed the intervention, with a mean number of six sessions
- 14 families withdrew from the family work before the workers believed that the family work was ready to finish, with a mean number of 2.6 sessions.

For the purposes of the study, those involved in the intervention were compared to 46 children who were offered the intervention but either the child or other family members declined to be involved. The workers also identified another child with similar risk levels to a family involved in the family work, who was suitable for family work, but the resources were not available. Forty children were selected in this category and constituted a control group. In other words, the project included an experimental group (completers) and three control groups (children who did not complete the intervention, children who declined or their families declined to participate, and children who were suitable but were not offered the intervention).

While the model is designed to be offered in the family home, the region in which the family work was undertaken is in a rural/remote part of New South Wales and in some cases it was not practical to do the family work in the home. Completion rates were generally good and non-completion was often related to practical reasons such as being placed in detention or moving to another region. Completion rates were, however, much better when the work was undertaken in the family home. When undertaken at home the completion rate was 83%, much higher than when the work was undertaken in offices where the completion rate was only 20%. Thirty five of the 45 interventions were undertaken in the home.

Family members and children generally found the experience of the family work very helpful. Approximately two months after finishing the sessions, research officers contacted 63 family members from 27 of the families participating in the study. Nearly all (97%) of the family members reported that they found the family work helpful or very helpful. Family members particularly liked developing ground rules for the sessions and in many cases continued to use the ground rules in their home after the sessions had been completed. Common ground rules included not speaking over each other, taking time out when feeling angry, and not swearing at each other. One mother commented as follows:

"It gave us an avenue to be able to speak ... everyone was able to speak without being interrupted. In the past when we tried to speak my son would become stressed and angry and walk away".

Sixty-three (63) workers who participated in the family work, at least one from each of the 45 families, expressed similar positive views, with the vast majority (90%) saying the family work

was helpful, or very helpful, for the families involved. Workers often talked about how undertaking the training and the family work sessions helped them to see themselves as skilled workers with a focus on rehabilitation rather than just compliance. Many said that the skills they learnt also transferred to one to one supervision. Two of the workers commented as follows:

"These are very complex families – any progress of meeting the issues is a big bonus. The debriefs are an essential part of it. I struggled at first, how we were going to do this. It worked well and we could do it".

"I felt that this was an extraordinary/outstanding service for this family. A lot of families are similar where communication is yelling or screaming – they had been turned away again and again from services. Negotiation between family members and opening up the ability to communicate is very helpful".

A two-year follow-up of recidivism for the children who participated in the family work revealed similar positive outcomes. Those who completed the family work had significantly longer time to first offence and had lower rates of reoffending and custodial sentences than the control groups (see Trotter, Evans and Baidawi, 2020). For those families who undertook the work at home, the results were particularly positive. The two-year sentenced to custody rate for children who completed the work in the family home was only 14% compared to 25% or more for each of the control groups. As mentioned earlier, the model worked best in the family home where completion rates were high.

3. Conclusion

Family relationships are a background factor in criminal behaviour. The available research indicates that family interventions can lead to improvements in family relationships and reduce recidivism. In fact, family work may be the preferable way for working for many children in the criminal justice system. It is evident from the study presented in this paper, undertaken in youth justice in Australia, that:

- children and family members could be encouraged to be involved in family work
- youth justice workers were able to apply the collaborative family work model with integrity following two days training
- family members responded positively to the family work
- workers found it helpful.

Completers and those who undertook the work at home also had lower recidivism rates than the control groups.

Family work in criminal justice is relatively new, particularly where it is delivered as part of the day-to-day work of youth justice practitioners. The evidence does suggest, however, that more widespread use of family work in youth justice would benefit children and their families as well as broadening the skills of workers. At this stage, perhaps the biggest challenge is how to encourage youth justice departments to prioritise family work. Much has been written about the value of core practice skills and evidence-based interventions in justice settings, and a number of authors lament the shortcomings in their implementation. Family work is one intervention that has been shown to be effective and there are good reasons to support both its wider implementation in youth justice and the expansion of research in this area.

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