The IDEAS approach to effective practice in youth justice

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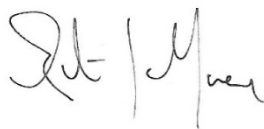
Contents

Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth 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 Heidi Dix and Jen Meade, outlining the IDEAS approach to effective practice in youth justice which comprises the five interlinked elements of influence, delivery, expertise, alliance, and support. The first four elements focus upon the knowledge, skills and personal qualities of the individual practitioner, while the fifth element covers the all-important organisational support. As set out, all five components are seen as necessary for effective evidence-informed, relationship-based practice. Crucially, the framework recognises the importance of drawing upon and merging the latest research findings, professional knowledge and practice wisdom, and the lived experiences of children and their families. Bringing all this evidence together in an accessible and comprehensive way is beneficial in building and embedding a continuous learning environment and culture, and ultimately in delivering positive outcomes for children and their families.

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1. Introduction

This Academic Insights paper outlines the IDEAS approach to effective practice. IDEAS is a framework that was originally developed to support practitioners in a youth justice service to evaluate their work with children and their families. It can also be used in settings such as Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) as well as the secure estate and by managers and leaders as a quality assurance tool since it outlines the skills, knowledge and personal attitudes that evidence suggests are necessary to be an effective practitioner within a youth justice context. As set out in the paper, the framework is made up of the following five elements:

Influence	• The ability to have and to use influence
Delivery	• The ability to skilfully use the tools and systems which support practice
Expertise	• A focus on continually building one's knowledge and translating it into practice
Alliance	• The ability to develop positive relationships
Support	• A focus on encouraging and supporting resilience in practitioners

In addition to describing how IDEAS works as part of individual practice, this paper will briefly suggest how the framework can support a culture of effective, relational practice.

2. The IDEAS approach and its key elements

A rapid review of the literature into what is most effective within youth justice and related fields was undertaken. The key themes that emerged were a combination of:

- the behaviours, values and personal qualities of the worker
- the professional knowledge base, reflection and curiosity they bring to the work
- the what of their work and how they do it.

These different elements were deconstructed and pulled together into five separate although interlinked parts which are called **influence, delivery, expertise, alliance, and support**, all of which we consider are necessary for effective relationship-based practice.

A brief overview of each of these elements is as follows:

- **Influence** in its simplest form enables practitioners to explore and become aware of their role, the boundaries within it, the limitations and how it is defined in law – the statutory aspects of the role and how practitioners can use this influence effectively to overcome structural barriers.

- **Delivery** stands for the consideration of the professional tools and systems that support practice, such as the AssetPlus assessment, and the ability to apply these skilfully within organisational frameworks and processes.

- The E stands for the **expert** knowledge and theory that is required within youth justice, as well as knowledge of effective interventions that informs this work.

- **Alliance** is the ability to develop trusting relationships with children and their personal and professional networks. This is particularly necessary when working with children who may, for a number of reasons, have a fear of authority. 'Tuning-in' and offering an empathic response, without judgment, whilst not colluding, can help children feel listened to and validated, all important factors to help children to develop agency and a sense of self-efficacy.

- The above elements are all focused on the knowledge, skills and values of the practitioner, and in order for the above four elements to exist, then organisational **support** is required. Space is needed for practitioners to engage in quality, critically reflective supervision to support professional expertise by ensuring that resilience, emotional intelligence, use of self, sound decision-making and reflective thinking skills underpin the effective use and application of the other parts of the model.

2.1 Influence

Influence is the element of IDEAS which is connected to the use of authority and power in a way which is value based and achieves good outcomes. It includes the authority conferred by role but is about more than this; it is also importantly about the ability to positively influence others through skills and behaviours.

Influence involves recognising and working with the fact that in a youth justice setting the practitioner will usually have the authority to make decisions that will have immediate consequences for children, some of which they may not like. **Influence** involves not just recognising this but also making it clear to the children themselves. It includes being explicit about 'the rules' of the interactions between the two and applying them fairly and consistently. This is not to suggest that practitioners should treat each child exactly the

same all of the time: but that any decision to treat them differently should be based on sound, well-considered, practice-based arguments that considers diversity and equity.

Influence includes the use of pro-social modelling techniques such as role clarification, acting as a role model and noticing and reinforcing positive behaviour and attitudes, whilst discouraging antisocial attitudes and behaviours (Trotter, 2014). Role clarification is the process of making clear with the child and their parents/carers the nature and purpose of the contact and the desired shared outcomes. It should cover what both parties have to do and what is negotiable and what is not (Trotter, 2014). For example, a child might have to attend a certain number of appointments but choose what areas to work on in those sessions.

Good practice example
The practitioner A meets with child B and asks her why she thinks she is there. B says because she has been told to be by the court. A says that this is part of why B is there but not the only reason. A explains that she has to supervise the court order B is on, but he also wants to help B have a positive future. A goes on to explain what B must do to keep to the conditions of the order. They look at why it might be difficult sometimes for B to do this and go on to identify together ways to avoid problems. They also both explore how A can assist with this (overcoming barriers to engagement). They then go on to talk about what B would like to get from their meetings (their "best hopes") and where they should start.   ***N.B. This meeting would form just the start of the process of role clarification which might take place over several meetings.***

Another important part of **influence** is the ability to influence others by acting as a role model. It is a truism that children are often especially quick to recognise if there is a difference between what adults say and what they do. It is important that in all settings, even potentially stressful ones such as secure settings, practitioners take care to consistently 'set a good example'. It is quite easy to unintentionally undermine this aspect of influence.

Poor practice example
The worker A in a YOI arrives late and doesn't apologise or explain to the child B why this is. The child has brought some information about training courses as they agreed in the last session. A is now running late and so says he does not have time to look at it now. Later on the wing, B overhears A saying to a colleague that they were late for work that morning because he argued with his partner and had stormed out the house and slept in his car. A and B have been focussing on employability skills which include punctuality and on resolving conflict.

Pro-social reinforcement which involves noticing and rewarding pro-social actions and attitudes is also an important part of **influence**. Trotter defines pro-social attitudes as 'actions and values which support and care for others' and which are underpinned by the values of 'non-sexism, non-racism, openness and tolerance' (Trotter, 2006, p.23). Effective pro-social reinforcement should go hand-in-hand with challenging pro-criminal or antisocial attitudes and behaviours. However, criticising, arguing, attempting to dominate, being confrontational and abusive do not work and 'approaches which blame, punish and judge clients in the hope that their behaviour will change seem doomed to failure' (Trotter, 2006, p.53). The practitioner should therefore focus on respectfully questioning specific attitudes or behaviour whilst continuing to show acceptance of the child as an individual without inducing shame.

The professional legitimate authority in the role is also an important aspect of **influence** which needs to be recognised and used to actively challenge and advocate for children to disrupt any discrimination, oppression and structural barriers they may be experiencing.

Influence is essentially about establishing personal and professional legitimacy and as McNeill has pointed out 'the legitimacy of the practitioner – on which his or her influence for good depends – is hard won, easily lost and almost impossible to recover' (McNeill et al., 2010, p.506).
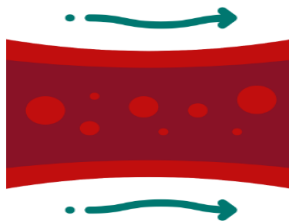
 The analogy of the human body can be a helpful way of illustrating the IDEAS model, as although each element is distinct, they are all vital and need to work together. So **influence** is illustrated as the **blood supply** which connects all the other elements and is essential to their functioning, but often works in the background behind the scenes.

2.2 Delivery

Delivery is about the skilful use of relevant practice frameworks, for example:

- working within policies and procedures (including safeguarding policies and procedures)
- working within standards and professional boundaries
- using the approved assessment tools
- keeping to timescales.

Practitioners who are skilled in this aspect of their work recognise that accurate and timely assessment, sentence planning, reviews and record keeping are an essential part of effective practice and not a distraction from the 'real work'.

There are a range of documents which set out how youth justice services in England and Wales should be delivered with which practitioners should be familiar. These include standards for youth justice (Youth Justice Board, 2019), case management guidance (Youth Justice Board, 2022) as well as the HM Inspectorate of Probation inspection standards for youth offending services (2021). Guidance is amended and standards will be revised from time to time, and it is essential that managers and practitioners stay up-to-date with the latest versions.

Children and families/carers are an important source of information in both assessment and planning. The assessment used in the majority of youth justice services in England and Wales is AssetPlus, which has been designed to reflect co-produced assessments and plans. As well as providing information, children should also be involved in negotiating goals and objectives with the practitioner wherever possible, unless to do so would affect the safety and wellbeing of others.

> ### Good practice example
>
> *Practitioner A is gathering information from child B. A believes that B commits offences with a friend upon whom he is very reliant. A would like to include an objective in B's plan that he will try to develop a wider friendship group. B sees things differently and thinks he offends on days when he visits his father with whom he has a difficult relationship and infrequent contact. Following further discussion between A and B, they agree that:*
>
> - *it would be helpful for B to develop a wider network of friends, and that they will look at some positive activities that B could undertake*
> - *A will arrange a restorative meeting between B and his father.*

Good basic day-to-day case recording can be a neglected area of practice. Good recording should be easy to understand, be clear and concise, and it should be written in such a way that it gives a clear picture to someone other than the case worker. Recording when the child was seen, their immediate situation at that point, what work was delivered, the impact of the work, and what is planned next provides a summary which helps evaluate the progress that has been made. It also offers a regular opportunity to notice and reinforce positive changes in the child's attitudes, behaviour, skills and identity if completed with them. Case recording is a central part of accountable practice and an important part of **delivery**.

Recording and filling in case records is not the most popular aspect of youth justice work; nevertheless, **delivery** is about transparency and accountability, not just to the agency, but to children and families and it provides an important safety net for practitioners and those working with them. Furthermore, a collaborative approach to case recording helps establish whether the child has understood the work undertaken, whether a different approach might be needed, as well as recognising progress that the child has made.

Good practice example

Practitioner A and child B meet and, at the end of the session, A asks B what he thinks should be recorded. B says he has learnt to look at more than one option to solve a problem and not just react. A asks B to give an example of how he could apply this new knowledge, but B is not able to think of one. A and B agree that they will record that B has learnt to think about different options to solve a problem and they also agree that when they next meet, B will talk about an example of when he has used his new skill. A also asks B what else he thinks will be helpful when they meet next and this is all recorded.

The D in IDEAS can also stand for dominance. The increase in the past two decades or so of managerialist and technical processes has arguably decreased professional autonomy and individual practitioner decision-making, and this is where conflict when pursuing a relationship-based approach can arise. Consequently, this aspect of the framework does have to be balanced by the other parts in order to achieve positive outcomes for children.

So if **influence** is about the appropriate and mindful use of authority (personal and professional), then **delivery** is about the way in which that authority is put into practice through a co-productive and participatory relationship-based approach. This element is described as the **skeleton** as it provides the framework for practice.

2.3 Expertise

Having **expertise** includes using knowledge from a range of sources which consists of, but is not limited to, formal academic research. As well as the professional knowledge and awareness of research that is necessary to select the most effective approaches and interventions, it also includes a commitment to critically reflect on and learn from the lived experience of children and their families. Practice wisdom, the learning which comes from experience, combined with the process of critical reflection, either individually or within supervision, is also applicable.

Knowledge of theoretical models and approaches is a key component of **expertise**; notable models and approaches include the following:

- The risk, need and responsivity (RNR) model first formalised in the 1990s has been significantly developed in recent years by Bonta and Andrews (2017). They make it clear that intervention should be targeted at those with the highest likelihood of reoffending and that criminogenic needs should be principally addressed in order to become foundations for change. The responsivity principle stipulates that interventions should be individualised to the child. A more recent addition to RNR is the 'organisational staffing principle', that emphasises the importance of a relational approach.

- Desistance theory (Wigzell, 2021) is based on enquiring about what is known in relation to why some people stay involved in crime and some do not. It also considers what interventions will support or accelerate this process. Research in this field has mainly been conducted with adults but some of the approaches are also helpful to children. Social bonds theory (Hirschi, 1969) suggests that establishing social bonds (to family, partner or employment for example) give children something to lose by continuing to offend. Narrative theories stress the significance of changes to the children's perception of themselves and recognition of their ability to make choices and influence events (White and Epston, 1990). Whilst some factors (such as getting older) are not something a practitioner can influence, supporting, and/or creating social bonds for children and encouraging the development of a more positive identity are areas which can form the basis of interventions (Hazel et al., 2020).

- There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that significant numbers of children known to youth justice services have experienced complex trauma (Liddel et al., 2016; Youth Justice Board, 2017) and therefore require relationships to help them to recover and achieve positive outcomes (Treisman, 2021). The Enhanced Case Management model used in Wales and elsewhere has as its foundations a psychological formulation and the sequencing of interventions (2015). This model has been formally evaluated and a number of benefits were identified for children which include the recognition of the impact of how early childhood trauma can impact on a child's development and the need to create safety and stability as foundations for change (Cordis Bright, 2017; Opinion Research Services, 2023).

- Strength-based approaches, such as the Good Lives Model (GLM) (Ward and Brown, 2004) and working with family and social networks are increasingly recognised as important. Signs of Safety (Turnell and Edwards, 1999) is a practice model often used in children's services both nationally and internationally, where the focus is on working collaboratively with the family's network to build safety and protection for the child. The principles of this approach can equally apply to youth justice.

Knowing what is effective with different groups of children in relation to aspects of their identity is also an important part of **expertise**. This includes an understanding of effective practice with girls and children from racialised groups. The evidence also suggests that release and resettlement planning need to be an integral aspect of a custodial sentence (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2015). In addition, the transition from custody into the community needs to be understood as likely to be challenging and stressful for children and planning and support to help children manage the transition is essential (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2015).

Expertise also includes the practitioner having the ability to reflect and learn from their own practice and the practice of others, being able to accept constructive feedback and taking seriously and acting on feedback from children and their families. It also involves using and building on their understanding of their own situation and motivations.

> **Good practice example**
>
> *Practitioner A has been trying to improve children B's problem-solving skills. At the end of each session B says the work they have done is "really boring and useless". A explores this with B and finds out that B has learnt he is about to become a father and would like to be involved with his baby although he is no longer with the baby's mother. A thinks that the birth of the baby and B's wish to be involved may offer an opportunity to help B to construct a new positive identity as well as offering an opportunity to practice his problem solving. A adapts the sessions to get B to define what qualities a good father should have, what he already has to build on, and explore how he might realistically become involved with his baby's upbringing when he is released from the YOI. They also take into account the mother's likely views and what is in the best interest of the child.*

For obvious reasons, this aspect of the model can be referred to as the **mind**.

2.4 Alliance

The precise nature of an effective working relationship between a practitioner and a child involves many facets and a wide range of skills. Drawing heavily on the work of Davies (2006), Holt (2000), McNeill et al. (2005), and Trotter (2006), these skills can be summarised as:

- the ability to display empathy, respect and warmth
- establishing a 'working alliance' – a mutual understanding and agreement about the nature and purpose of intervention
- adopting an approach that is child-centred, and collaborative.

These skills and attributes have also been identified by children as important. In addition to this, children say they need to be able to trust practitioners and know that they are cared about (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016).

Trotter (2014) suggests that one of the tasks of the practitioner working with a child in settings such as youth justice where participation is not something the child has chosen, is to teach them how to accept and make use of professional help. Negotiating shared tasks and desired outcomes (Miller and Rollnick, 2013), and encouraging children to become active participants in the process of change (Newman et al., 2005) are part of this process. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989) clearly outlines that children have a right to have their views considered in decisions that affect them, and although the UNCRC is not part of the legislative framework in England and Wales (see Academic Insights paper 2022/05 by Forde), the need to consider the wishes and feelings of a child is contained within the Children Act 2004 (HM Government, 2004). The active participation of children and their families in the design and delivery of interventions or individual support plans, and the shaping of services, is an important component in achieving a reduction in offending (National Youth Agency, 2011; see also Academic Insights paper 2021/10 by Smithson and Gray), and collaboration is one of the four tenants that underpin the Child First approach adopted by the Youth Justice Board in their case management guidance (2022).

Trotter (2006) defined core relationship skills as openness, honesty, empathy, optimism, capacity to understand and articulate the children's feelings, coupled with self-disclosure and humour and with the addition of being non-blaming; these are the core values that underpin the youth justice relationship-based practice framework (Stephenson and Dix, 2017).

Whilst establishing a working relationship with children is important, it is not sufficient in isolation; 'it does appear that while worker relationship skills are important...they may only be valuable if they are combined with other effective practice skills such as pro-social modelling and problem-solving' (Trotter and Evans in McNeill et al., 2010, p.133). In addition, a sense of purpose and focus on outcomes is essential; 'it is possible to be well engaged with someone, enjoying an energetic conversation but without any clear sense of direction' (Miller and Rollnick, 2013, p.93).

A challenge posed in developing effective working alliances with children can be the complex trauma they have or are currently experiencing which means they can appear to be 'hostile, unreliable, deceptive, disinterested, disrespectful and committedly antisocial' (Polaschek, 2005, p.4), which can be personally difficult for practitioners. The impact of working with children with one or more of these characteristics can be overlooked by managers. As well as displaying empathy, warmth and respect, practitioners also need to tune in to themselves to consider their own feelings about the relationship and identify any blocks that may be getting in the way of this developing. Indeed, many trauma-informed practice models have recognised the impact of vicarious and secondary trauma (Liddel et al., 2016) and so have built-in specialist spaces that offer containment for staff outside of the formal supervision space.

Developing positive relationships with other professionals to ensure that rights and entitlements for children are joined up and aligned is necessary, and the values highlighted earlier such as empathy and respect need to be adopted when working with other professionals, particularly where professional values and purpose may differ. Being aware of other organisational cultures, ethos and priorities can help to build mutually trusting relationships to benefit children.

This has clear links to **influence** and the use of legitimate authority included in this other aspect of the IDEAS model. In terms of the metaphor of the body, influence is the blood supply and so we consider **alliance** to be the **heart** as it is what keeps the blood flowing and enables influence to occur.

2.5 Support

For practitioners to become research-aware and to develop critical thinking skills, managers need to be able to facilitate learning and organisational support needs to be provided at a senior leadership level. In essence, the system – the organisational setting – needs to be ready and able to implement this way of working (Edovald, 2013).

Practitioners need to not feel constrained by a culture of evidence-informed practice, but rather feel inspired and supported by it to develop their critical thinking and reflective abilities. Encouragement is needed for practitioners and managers to become curious about what works effectively with children and their families. Peters and Waterman (1982) suggest that shared values are at the heart of a functioning organisation, and therefore effective communication of the commitment to effective practice is essential. Managers and senior leaders have a responsibility to promote a culture of learning (Senge, 1990) that is based on

mutual trust and openness where staff members are encouraged and are allocated time and space to become reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983). Having a shared understanding of 'what good looks like' and sharing a common language helps to build a culture of high expectations within the organisation.

A strengths-based approach, with practitioners being supported across all levels of the service to build on what they are doing well and to link this to research and evidence, is a way of frontline and senior managers modelling the values and behaviour that is expected of practitioners in the approach that is taken in their work with children and their families (Kittay, 1999, p.68).

Hawkins and Shohet (2000) suggest that supervision is an ideal place for an organisation to learn, develop and culturally evolve, and that there is a need to provide processes for discussions and dialogue that occur within supervision to be shared with the wider organisation. Everybody has different needs that depend on a range of factors including skills, knowledge, confidence, gender, ethnicity and culture. Some practitioners may require more nurturing than others, depending on personality types and whether they are operating from a secure base (Bowlby, 1988). Rogers (2002) suggests that learning is affected by the personality type of an individual; whether somebody is an introvert or an extrovert affects how receptive they are to change. Therefore, within supervision, it may be necessary to help individual practitioners to identify skills and experience they bring to their work and to build confidence to learn from what they are doing well.

Balancing performance and case management, with space for reflection in supervision is a challenge, but by utilising solution-oriented approaches and adopting the principles of appreciative inquiry (Annis Hammond, 2013), this can be achieved.

So this aspect of the IDEAS model can be described as the **muscles** that hold everything together and the more they are used, the better the body is able to function and the stronger it becomes.

2.6 Developing a culture of effective practice

The framework can be used in many ways to support effective, evidence-informed practice within a youth justice context. Below are some suggestions and we suspect there are many other ways it can be utilised as practitioners, managers and leaders exercise their creativity.

- **Reflective practice:** practitioners can use the model as part of individual reflection, or through more formal supervision. Each aspect of the model can be mapped out to help practitioners to identify where their strengths are and where they are most confident, and also to identify any training or development needs they have.

- **New roles:** practitioners can use the model when they are preparing to move to a new role and as part of the preparation for the interview process to determine what they need to know.

- **Quality assurance:** the model can also be used as a quality assurance tool by leaders to develop a culture of effective, relational practice within organisations as it outlines the skills, knowledge and personal attitudes that evidence suggests are necessary to be an effective practitioner within youth justice.

3. Conclusion

In recognition of the evolving nature of 'effective practice' in youth justice, it is necessary to create a framework and culture which increases the likelihood that practitioners will both know about and use the best available evidence of effectiveness in their work with children. We have pulled together the thinking and evidence in an accessible and comprehensive way to form a mapping tool to enable individuals and organisations to review their practice.

We think the model helps to reconcile different ends of the spectrum that are sometimes believed to be in conflict such as relationship-based practice on one side and research-informed practice on the other.

In summary, we would suggest that evidence-informed practice is not a substitute for practice wisdom or for the dismissal of the voice of children and parents (Newman et al., 2005). Rather, by merging these approaches in the way that the IDEAS framework suggests, exciting possibilities are to be found that can provide positive outcomes for children and their families. It can also contribute significantly to creating a cultural change in which high professional expectations and outcomes for children and their families becomes the norm.

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