

**UNDERSTANDING THE UNIQUENESS
OF MINISTERING IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM**

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It seems that much has been written and taught regarding how to do ministry in the adult prison system. However, I believe that there are at least six major categories of unique characteristics that differentiate ministering to and teaching juvenile offenders. An understanding of these characteristics is critical if we are to be successful in reaching and changing the values of these kids and the direction of their lives.

These characteristics relate to maturity, both physiological and experiential, the closer connection to family and community of birth, the peer significance affect, societal attitudes, the role of the justice system and the faith community.

Brain Development, Maturity and Life Experiences

One of the most significant distinguishing characteristics of teaching and ministering to youth in the juvenile justice system, and in fact in the school system or Sunday school class, is the physiological development of the brain of this group of people. Generally I am referring to youth between the ages of about 10 and 21, although individuals mature and develop at different rates and the information now available now suggests that the brain development may continue into the mid-twenties. What we must consider, however, is the impact of emotional verses reasoned actions; the lack of appreciation for danger and long term consequences of action due to immature brain development.

In recent studies, which included functional magnetic resonance imaging, compared the activity of teenage brains to those of adults done at McLean Hospital Brain Imaging Center in Boston, Massachusetts, researchers found that when processing emotions, Adults have greater activity in the frontal lobes than teenagers. Teenagers have greater activity in amygdala. As teenagers age into adulthood, the overall focus of brain activity shifts from the amygdala to the frontal lobes. (Interestingly, recent studies suggest that the ageing process may reverse that movement, especially in people who suffer from Alzheimer's.

The frontal lobes have been implicated in behavioral inhibition and the ability to control emotions and impulses; where decisions about right and wrong and cause-effect relationships are processed.

The amygdala is part of the limbic system and is involved in instinct “gut” reaction responses, “including fight or flight” Lower activity in the frontal lobes could lead to poor control over behavior and emotions. Higher activity centered in the amygdala region may be associated with high levels of emotional arousal and reactionary decision-making.

The results from the McLean study suggest that while adults can use rational decision-making processes when facing emotional decisions, adolescent brains are simply not equipped to think through things the same way. For example, when faced with the decision of whether to get into a car with a drunk driver, an adult sees the danger and makes a decision based on that perceived danger, but the adolescent may make the decision based on a perceived impact on friendships.

The review also reported on work done by Jay Giedd and his colleagues at the National Institutes of Mental Health, where they reached similar conclusions using brain-imaging techniques. They found that development in the frontal lobe continues throughout adolescence and well into the early twenties. Their findings based on these brain imaging studies suggest that, “adolescence may provide as sort of ‘second chance’ to refine behavioral control and rational decision making.”

These studies may offer some hope to teenagers suffering from behavioral or emotional problems. “The fact that the decision making centers of the brain continue to develop well into the twenties could mean that troubled teenagers still have time as well as the physiology to learn how to control their impulsive behaviors.”

These studies do suggest that teenagers need guidance as their brains develop, especially in the realm of controlling emotional impulses in order to make rational decisions. It is becoming clear that the adolescent brain is a “work in progress,” and, that parents and educators can help this progress along through open communication and clear boundaries.

Unfortunately another aspect of the physiology of brain development in adolescents is reflected in the impact of alcohol and drug use on the brain and thus on behavior.

There are other implications related to the immaturity of these youthful offenders not directly connected to their physiological development. Some of these characteristics include:

- ❑ They tend to be still hopeful about the future - they have not usually become so hardened and defeated that they cannot be helped.
- ❑ Since it is well recognized that violence and delinquent behavior are learned behaviors that can be unlearned, the younger the offender the more likely positive intervention may result in changed behavior, especially since we know that the brain continues to grow and change.
- ❑ Transition into adulthood puts a heavy burden of decision making on the adolescent faced with them. They are experiencing new freedoms (driving, drinking, drugs, and sexual experiences) often without adequate education, brain development and/or adult role models to handle the change properly. They are seeking independence without being equipped for it, in part because they lack responsible mature life experiences. It should come as no surprise that 16-year-old boys are the largest population group of incarcerated boys.
- ❑ Our society presents mind-boggling choices, difficult for even the most mature, and kids are often forced to make those decisions earlier than they should, e.g., where to live and how to earn a living and support a family; in other words, how to be the “man of the family.”
- ❑ They are often dealing with these life challenges without a positive role model to help them develop positive ways to deal with them, and the result can be a negative experience, which aggravates the frustration even more.

- ❑ Sexual development precedes mental capacity to deal with emotional impact and consequences, and the softening of societal norms and restrictions means the young person must make these choices with little guidance

Today, because of television, Internet etc. these young people are more aware of the world around them and how they fit into it and compare to others. Since much of delinquent behavior is driven by a perception of injustice and resentment, the behavior is learned as a means of getting “needs” met, driven by immediate gratification desires before they have the ability to earn what they want, because their earning life is ahead of them.

As noted, adult responsibilities are often imposed on them or assumed by them when they are not prepared and without adequate role models, experience, knowledge or training to handle. Society today has more incidents of single-mother-led-families, and the son must be the “man of the family.” In these situations, there may be insufficient income production by adults, and the youth must assume a greater responsibility for that role. There have always been times when these situations existed, but there seem to be more now and because of the information available through television and Internet, the child is more aware of his relative position to the community around him.

Therefore, maturity can play an important roll in the significance of certain characteristics that are recognized as determinants of criminality, including, the presence or lack of self-control, the presence or lack of problem solving skills, and beliefs, which condemn or accept violence. Likewise, the impact on personal factors that can be protective for kids is significant. These factors may include a strong and sustained relationship with at least one adult, and the ability to evoke positive responses in others.

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(2) Report dated July 2000 and published in a review by Gargi Talukder, on the web at www.brainconnection.com

(3) Prison Fellowship publication, “Developments” July 1996

Closer Connection to Family and Community of Birth

A child is vulnerable in relationship to the family and the community and that impacts behavior more significantly, if for no other reason than that the child is dependent for food, shelter, security, nurturing, and education

There is a considerable body of research that helps us understand some of the many risk factors that contribute to youths' propensity for violence and delinquency. Many relate directly to the family and community in which the child grows. For example, they are more likely to come from families:

- ❑ Where parents are abusive or neglectful,
- ❑ Where harsh or erratic discipline is the norm,
- ❑ Where marital discord and instability prevail,
- ❑ Where at least one adult family member has been involved with the criminal justice system.

They most often live in communities:

- ❑ Rife with drugs, crime, guns and poverty,
- ❑ Where positive adult role models are scarce.

They know statistically that the family environment that indicates that a child may be, "at-risk" have certain characteristics:

- ❑ 91% had received Aid for Dependent Children
- ❑ 81% had family histories of abuse or neglect
- ❑ 70% had a parent or sibling with a criminal record
- ❑ 70% had mothers who were younger than 20 at first birth
- ❑ 63% had been suspended from school at least once

- ❑ 56% had learning disabilities
- ❑ 45% came from families of four or more children.

These are characteristics of “at-risk” youth because they are predictors of the potential, statistically, to become involved with the justice system. They apply to adults, but they are not used because of the time distance from these factors in the life of an adult. The impact of disappointments within the family and its relative status in the community is fresher and represents a greater proportion of life experiences. Therefore, if one grows up in chaos, stress and poverty, in a broken or dysfunctional family, where there was abuse and neglect, those negative experiences make up a substantial portion of the life experiences which an adolescent has had at that point in life.

Another family related aspect of the actions of youth is that the youth’s behavior also impacts the family. It can have a very negative effect on relationship between the youth and his family, and the development of delinquent behavior in siblings. Sexual offenses against younger siblings can create painful “choice” issues for parents.

Responding to the behavior of the child, a parents’ attitude can effect the length of detention, and commitment to and release from incarceration and the young person can experience an even greater sense of abandonment when the parent does not respond to get him released or jeopardizes the rights of the child out of frustrations and anger. Of course, involvement with the juvenile justice system adds to an already chaotic and troubled situation.

Peer Significance Affect

Peers, of course, share common experiences and maturity and can relate to each other empathetically regarding music, parental restrictions, school, sexual development and interest. Friends become the most influential people in their lives. This is particularly significant where there is no positive adult role model influence in the child’s life.

Where parental support and love are missing, peers with common experience fill the void. Over 50% of 15 to 17 year olds who join gangs indicate that they join, “for a sense of belonging, like a family.” This means that the child in that situation is learning his or

her life experiences from other children, who are similarly situated in terms of maturity, and family and community influence.

Society's Attitudes

Society seeks to protect the child by keeping him with the family if possible. The family is expected to provide for the basic needs of the child, including an adequate place to live, sufficient food, security, and education. When the family fails to do that, society looks for a means to correct the problem, often at the least cost and inconvenience to its other members.

Often the way that is done is by demanding that the behavior be punished or at least changed rather than make a real commitment to break the cycle of at-risk conditions by providing programs to teach "life skills." The effect of this is that the very same risk factors are repeated in the life of the child as an adult, including the chaos, neglect and abuse in the families they create.

All too often their created family will have similar at-risk characteristics as the families in which they grew up. For example, I am constantly amazed at how many boys tell me how angry they are at their fathers for not being part of their lives and they vow to not repeat that situation, when they already have children for which they are not caring and they are incarcerated and already out of their child's life.

Society's aim should be to break that cycle by teaching life skills which correct misperceptions about families and parenting.

The Role and Function of the Justice System

When the family fails and the youth gets in trouble, the community expects the justice system to take their place. But the justice system is not equipped to do so in the nurturing manner that we want and expect in a healthy family situation. Of course there are situations where even the impersonal government agency can and will do a better job than the parents who failed in their responsibility.

Public programs are designed to change behavior (in response to society's demands) rather than change the person. Too often, they provide insufficient "life skills" training necessary for success outside of the justice system. The cost of providing security and education while trying to help the child relearn behavior patterns, results in

short shrift for jobs skills, parenting, conflict resolution, anger management, therapy and character building. The State is being asked to act as “parent” without the relational commitment.

Faith based programs aimed at filling some of the gaps, often are frustrated by factors related to staff attitudes toward those programs, the remoteness of facilities from large potential volunteer population bases, and both real and perceived issues pertaining to separation of church and state as they affect what the juvenile justice system can do in terms of programs.

Another problem encountered is the lack of program development that is age appropriate and reflects an understanding of the unique issues affecting juvenile behavior and physiological differences of various ages in the system.

Finally, state imposed “parental” restrictions affecting security, confidentiality, religious choices and release impact the success of any programs intended to rehabilitate the child.

The Faith Community

The Faith community is uniquely positioned and instructed to be part of the solution for impacting the juvenile justice system but for several reasons that does not happen. Unfortunately, there is too often a lack of willingness to interact with kids in trouble who are not “our kids.” Another issue that sometimes hinders a faith-based program is an unbalanced focus on “conversion” rather than “love and forgiveness”

There are many aspects of the juvenile justice system itself that impacts the effectiveness of faith-based programs. As noted above, the remoteness of state secure facilities often reduces the potential volunteer base on which to draw and good programs suffer from lack of adequate manpower. Sometimes rigid programming schedules that fill the day and leave little time for faith based outside programs can hinder their effectiveness. Devaluing the faith based programs in the juvenile justice system occurs because of the absence of Chaplains or other staff with responsibility for addressing the spiritual needs of incarcerated youth or assigning those responsibilities to disinterested or hostile staff and failing to make adequate resources and staff available to support the faith based programs.

Conclusion

What we know is that ministering and teaching adolescents is different than working with adults. Attempts to apply “adult prison ministry” methods and programs to those in the juvenile justice system will fail if the different characteristics related to maturity and disproportionate impact of negative life experiences and peer influence affect is not incorporated into the programming. Likewise, if society persists in demanding care and protection for children from dysfunctional families without supporting the development and implementation of programs designed to break the cycle of at-risk factors, we will continue to replicate failures and the cycle will continue. We must recognize that the government, which operates the juvenile justice system, is not equipped to adequately replace the failed family without program changes and the help of the faith community.