**Communication with young people is key to reducing youth offending**

Working with young people in the criminal justice arena can be daunting at times, but the use of effective communication skills within an Early Interventions project can sometimes be the answer to getting the young people to change their lifestyles and fit in with today’s society.

When working with young people in the Youth Justice System with the YOT in Swindon a few years ago as an Early Interventions worker young people were either categorised as being up for a Final Warning or a Reprimand.

Final Warning would see the serious offenders being sent to court and subsequently given a supervision order or at the last resort sent to a Young Offenders Institution.

Reprimands would initially involve us assessing the young person at a police station on their suitability to work with the Early Interventions team. An agreement would be sought by the parent or guardian for this to take place.

Before the young person was allocated an appropriate worker an assessment would take place where information would then be gathered on their personal circumstances, where they lived, do they attend school, did they have any issues with their mental health or had drug and alcohol issues and how their family circumstances impinged on their lives.

After the assessment was completed, the allocated worker who would work with them in school or in the community. Also, referrals were made to other outside agencies: Children Mental Health Service, Social Services or Youth Workers who would offer suitable projects for the young people and keep them out of trouble.

With the local schools onboard with the project, we were able to put together a plan and use tools that enabled us to help these young people change or use teaching aids around Team Talk (looking at individuals behaviours and how they could make changes to their life); or Retracking which was an individual program that you could dip in and out of on different aspects of their lives.

At the end of each session they were given a simple task which could be on fight or flight or people’s perception of differing roles in society. This encouraged them to think outside the box.

Communication and working with young people were the key to getting them to change their behaviours and to reduce their reoffending.

In a short space of time we were getting referrals from schools who had disruptive pupils and our help was requested to help them stay in school and stop them being sent to a Pupil Referral Unit.

We did expand our information to schools by giving them CD’s on young people’s behaviours and that was well received in the schools. We produced a package for primary schools, which was well received, and this was nationally recognised.

Restorative Justice started to appear of interest to the early interventions agenda and a CD was produced using young actors from a local school around an incident where a person was attacked, the offender arrested, and their subsequent attendance at a RJ conference.

Early interventions worked for at least eight years but then stopped because of the inference of austerity, and the lack of money and early interventions ceased to the detriment of the young people and the local community.

Today we have changed our approach to how we deal with the majority of the young people with the introduction of the Youth Restorative Intervention.

This is where the scenario changes with the young person accepting responsibility for the actions they have taken and the case is now passed onto Children’s First, where the young person is triaged, and the case is allocated.

In theory this should be easy, but in practice there is a lot more to the process, the YRI is the new form of Early Interventions. At this stage communication is critical to the restorative approach.

RJ is generally victim lead, so it is critical that a visit is arranged to see the harmed person at the earliest opportunity to establish what has happened and what they would like to see from the restorative process.

In some cases, the victim is unaware of what a YRI is, or what has happened to the young person who was involved in the initial incident. During this visit all options in the restorative process are explained to the harmed person, would they like to meet the harmer in a face-to-face conference, would they like a restorative letter, anything else from the process or do they not wish to partake?

Communication with the harmer varies from case to case, some are shamed or embarrassed by what they have done and do not wish to meet the harmer but are prepared to write a letter of apology to the person harmed. But in some instances, the harmer needs to meet the harmed person, to personally explain and apologise for what they have done with the hope that the incident does not occur again and both parties can move on with their lives.

A restorative letter differs from a letter of apology because it responds to the needs and questions of the victim. In most cases the victim will write, or communicate in another way, to the victim expressing their needs and questions relating to the intervention. The harmer will then respond to the victim addressing all the questions and needs.

There are occasions where the harmer is out of control and has upset their family because of their behaviour and we restoratively mediate where communications between family members has broken down.

This can be challenging for those who are in conflict, but not understanding each other’s needs. This conflict maybe in the form of anti-social behaviour in their community which impinges on their family, criminal damage to property, not in education, physical violence, verbal altercations or hanging around with inappropriate peers (county lines).

Some of their actions can be put down to use of alcohol or drugs or the lack of money to buy these items, or the lack of communications skills.

When we are in these situations’ communication are at the forefront of how we engage with these young people, to make changes and guide them in the right direction. Some young people who have engaged with the process have attended restorative conferences and have benefitted from the experience and moved on with their lives.

So, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE.

*Gerry Duckworth, Restorative Gloucestershire*