Improving Practice for Girls

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We must take cognisance of the role that gender plays and move away from any assumption that the difference between working with boys and girls lies in 'the removal of urinals and painting the walls pink' (Matthews and Hubbard, 2008, p.494). Young females involved in offending are a group that 'fall between two stools'. Burman and Batchelor (2009) suggest that this is because policies on youth offending focus on young men, 'ignoring gender' and females who offend and they 'fail to differentiate between older and younger women (ignoring age)'. This, according to Burman and Batchelor (2009, p.1) leads to young females involved in offending as being an 'invisible minority whose offending pathways and distinctive needs have gone largely undocumented and unaddressed'.

Working with this "invisible minority" can present professionals with many challenges. Difficulties in building effective relationships and sustaining these relationships are two main areas of concerns expressed. Practitioners often state that they feel they are making significant progress in their relationships with girls only to see this change, often without warning or any obvious precipitating event. As professionals it is crucial to develop an understanding of this type of occurrence and the apparent disconnection within the dynamics of the relationship. To do this there must be an understanding of the causation of the girl's behaviour and the application of a theoretical framework to provide context. Understanding relational theory and relational aggression and the characteristics of this are emerging as 'must have' tools in the professional toolbox.

Matthews and Hubbard (2008) have provided what they refer to as five essential elements that should be in place when working with girls and young women:

1/ Using assessment to guide programme planning and evaluation;
• Measure girls' risk of recidivism through the use of a validated, actuarial risk assessment instrument.
• Conduct other standardized, objective measures of problem areas known to be prevalent among girls.
• Measure girls' strengths and assets.
• Conduct an in-depth interview with each girl upon intake.

2/ Building a helping alliance;
• A strong helping alliance enhances a client's capacity for positive psychological change.
• Girls are socialised to listen to others and value the emotional exchange that takes place within intimate relationships with others.

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• "Gender-responsive" advocates support programs rooted in the "relational model" which sees positive change for girls being dependent on affiliation with others through trusting interpersonal relationships.

3/ Gender-responsive cognitive-behavioural approach;
• Within the context of a strong helping alliance, the use of a gender responsive cognitive behavioural approach is recommended.
• Cognitive-behavioural approaches should be modified from those typically used with male populations in two key ways.
• Cognitive-behavioural group process should be modified to accommodate girls' needs for greater support, safety, and intimacy.
• The content of cognitive-behavioural programs should be modified to target the types of cognitive distortions and processes that have been shown in research to be more commonly associated with girls' problem outcomes.

4/ Promoting healthy connections;
• Effective programmes for girls should build on the risk and protection framework, and emphasize the importance of building positive connections in the domains of family, peers, school, and community.
• The goal is to surround a girl with social support that insulates her from adverse circumstances that may lead to risky or antisocial behaviour.
• A supportive relationship with a caring adult has consistently emerged in research as an important protective factor.

5/ Recognising within-girl differences;
• "What works" and gender-responsive groups have recognized the importance of understanding differences that affect the way girls relate to others and the way they respond to interventions.
• These differences include mental health disorders, sexual preference, and cultural backgrounds.

These elements can be implemented in all environments, by all professionals, and underpinning each is the use of relationships. As Matthews and Hubbard (2008, p.500) recognise, 'A very important next step involves working with agencies to implement the recommended elements and test their effectiveness to further clarify "what works" for girls'. In doing so, there are no financial implications to consider - the resources required are human resources and bearing in mind the key theme about relationships being the corner stone of working with girls, then these elements are surely worth consideration by practitioners.

If, as professionals, we are to engage effectively with girls then we must incorporate gender into the development and formulation of care plans and consider gender not only within a contextual risk framework but also within age and stage of development.

CYCJ is currently developing a comprehensive training programme for professionals who provide services to girls and young women. The first stage was launched by the Children's Minister, Aileen Campbell MSP on 20 October 2015. See the CYCJ website for further details.

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