

# Working with juvenile offenders through Extension

by *Melissa M. Cummins*

## Introduction

The average cost to keep a juvenile offender in locked detention was \$248 a day in 2011. At over \$90,000 a year, this creates a significant financial burden on taxpayers. The most effective programs at reducing recidivism rates and promoting positive life outcomes for youth are administered in the community, outside of the criminal or juvenile justice systems. Some of these programs have been shown to reduce recidivism by up to 22 percent.

For a decade, preeminent youth development scholar Dr. Richard Lerner and the team at the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development at Tufts University have been working with faculty at land-grant universities to conduct The 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development. The most recent wave of this study, published in 2012, shows that the positive youth development approach used in 4-H helps youth resist participating in risky behavior and increases their overall success in life. Juvenile offenders benefit from positive youth development opportunities, helping them to become contributing citizens who are making positive impacts rather than becoming liabilities to the state.

This publication is intended for youth development professionals. It covers the essentials of working with juvenile offenders, especially those in their teens, including understanding their characteristics, making contacts with organizations and agencies that support them, and choosing activities that build their life skills.

## Characteristics of Juvenile Offenders

While it is unwise to generalize, adjudicated youth do tend to have some common characteristics. Youth in the juvenile justice system come from a variety of settings, including alternative schools, day treatment centers, group homes, and residential treatment centers. These youth are considered “at-risk” or “high-risk.”

Juvenile offenders come from many backgrounds, but most come from homes with low levels of parental or extended family support, alcohol and drug use, incarcerated parents, and other challenges. Teens in alternative schools and in the juvenile justice system often need outside support to successfully navigate life. These youth have limited basic life skills such as self-care, cooking, or nutritional skills.

Juvenile offenders have often been dismissed from the public school system and have low levels of academic skills. Some are working toward their GED or other high school equivalency certification. Drug and alcohol abuse can affect brain function and critical thinking skills. Although this is not true for all juvenile offenders, it is the case for many.

Many juvenile offenders come from homes that are in disarray. They did not have what are considered “typical” childhood experiences, such as reading books with their parents before being tucked in bed at night or learning to color. They did not make cookies, nor were they expected to contribute through regular chores. Many of these teens grew up in homes where they did not feel safe at night and did not have adequate food or clothing.

Compounding these fears and sense of alienation, public school teachers often separate the “trouble kids” from the rest of the group, requiring them to put their desks at the front of the classroom or out in the hallway. Juvenile offenders are typically aggressive or perceived as troublemakers in elementary school, which means they might not have been able to participate in special class projects.

Juvenile offenders have not experienced many caring adults in their lives and often have attachment disorders. Therefore, they are usually guarded and do not trust or respect adults automatically. They crave positive attention. Being callous and unemotional may be a defense mechanism they have learned, especially when interacting with adults. Treating youth not as “bad kids” but as kids who made bad choices is essential. Their first interaction with an adult may be a test for them to determine whether or not the adult genuinely cares.

## **Developing Community Connections**

Teenagers in general, but especially juvenile offenders and high-risk youth, typically do not simply walk into the Extension office on their own. Marginalized youth, in particular, are unlikely to seek support from traditional outlets or organizations. That means 4-H professionals must go outside of traditional 4-H recruitment channels and develop connections with community organizations that work directly with juvenile offenders. Below are some connections that youth development professionals should make.

### **Department of Juvenile Justice**

Local departments of juvenile justice are one of the first contacts to make. The U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention website (<http://www.ojjdp.gov>) provides contact information for each state. These departments have a variety of programs and initiatives to help rehabilitate these youth and reduce recidivism.

One of the main benefits of working within a juvenile justice-sponsored program is the involvement of probation officers and other trained professionals. Educators working with juvenile offenders do not need to know their offenses. This information will probably not be provided even if requested, but probation officers know what types of restrictions apply to the youth they supervise. For example, some youth cannot use knives or scissors. This is important

information to have before teaching sewing or cooking.

Probation officers have a relationship with these youth and can take care of any discipline issues that can arise. Such youth likely have rules they must follow. Having professionals to enforce those rules, if necessary, saves the instructor from being a disciplinarian.

### **Rehab and Residential Facilities**

Working with departments of juvenile justice can also open doors to working in other programs. Many counties have drug rehabilitation or residential facilities for teens that are wards of the state, runaways, or in transition between homes. Juvenile justice departments know most of the services available in the community for at-risk youth.

### **Department of Health and Welfare**

The local department of health and welfare may also be a good resource. High numbers of juvenile offenders have incarcerated parents and are in foster homes. Some child and family services departments within health and welfare provide opportunities for teens in the foster care system. See what role 4-H can play within this system.

### **Alternative Schools**

Many public school districts have alternative schools for youth unable to succeed in the traditional public school setting. Youth attending these schools typically have had disciplinary issues in the classroom or excessive trancies. Alternative schools look for opportunities to provide their students with life skill development and find it challenging to identify community partners.

## **Choosing Skill-Building Activities**

Because of their less-than-ideal home lives, juvenile offenders benefit from almost any life-skill-building, hands-on activity. Hands-on involvement is essential. A lecture approach does not work with this population or with most youth!

Educators also should not forget the varying academic capabilities of these young people. Ask for volunteers to read materials instead of calling on a specific person. Allow time for working together on a project rather than requiring individual work.

Activities teaching cooking, sewing, gardening, financial management, basic home management, job skills, and self-care are usually well received by this group. Talk to the youth’s probation officer, teacher,

facilitator, caretaker, or other supervising adult to identify specific needs to address.

### **Life Skill Development**

Perhaps the biggest deficiency facing these teens is basic pro-social life skill development. Many would suggest that these teens have developed their own toolkit of life skills—hustling, stealing, hot-wiring cars, picking locks, etc. However, these are socially unacceptable life skills. Life skills related to financial management, cooking, cleaning, nutrition, laundry, personal hygiene, organization, goal setting, employment, and planning for the future are all topics of value for this group. All lessons should include some instruction and significant time for hands-on activities and reflection.

**Employment planning.** Sometimes employment planning can be tricky for this audience, especially if they have committed felonies or are on probation. Discuss this with professionals in the juvenile's correctional facility. The teens' involvement with the correctional system is something to consider. A typical resume class that would be helpful for 4-H youth will need adaptation to fit the needs and uniqueness of juvenile offenders.

**Cooking and nutrition.** Cooking or any other lessons where food is involved are favorites among all teens. It is easy to incorporate a variety of life skills into cooking lessons. Approved 4-H curricula typically include a leader guide with lesson plans that utilize a variety of activities to involve the teens in the entire process. Many of these youth do not know how to use a stove or kitchen utensils, wash dishes, or even use a broom. Cooking lessons provide an opportunity to learn and incorporate these skills.

Teens in general, but particularly these teens, do not have healthy eating habits. Cooking activities familiarize them with MyPlate guidelines and help them recognize foods in each of the categories. Being able to prepare healthy, inexpensive snacks and meals is an important life skill. More importantly, this gives youth exposure to other types of foods and helps them appreciate the value of eating healthily.

**Financial management.** Most of these teens have had little or no discretionary funds and have little experience managing finances. Many have experience at buying or selling drugs and living in a street economy. However, financial management skills are crucial to help them realize how other, law-abiding people live.

Many useful resources are available for teaching financial management to teens, and Cooperative Extension System educators have developed many curricula targeted specifically at the teen audience. Welcome to the Real World is a financial management curriculum delivered by Extension educators and 4-H professionals to high school students. The National Endowment for Financial Education has lesson plans and materials for educators to teach teens financial management (<http://www.hsfpp.org/>).

**Home management.** Do not assume these youth know even the basics of home management. Anything taught to them in this area is helpful. Some topics specific to home management include basic cleaning (wiping off a table, cleaning out the fridge, sweeping the floor, etc.), washing dishes, sorting laundry, washing and folding clothes, using a washing machine, ironing, planning meals, and changing diapers or caring for infants and toddlers.

There are a variety of resources for home management skills education including 4-H curricula and Extension publications. Extension educators specializing in family and consumer sciences are an invaluable resource for finding educational materials on home management. The USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture website (<http://www.csrees.usda.gov/index.html>) provides links to county Extension offices.

### **Gardening**

Gardens in prisons and jails are becoming more common in the United States, and gardens are appearing in juvenile detention centers, too. Some facilities use these programs to give inmates an employable skill set they can use once they are released. Others use gardens as a means to supplement the meal program with fresh produce. Some programs focus on the therapeutic benefits of gardening.

With juvenile offenders, gardening is a way to connect youth with the outdoors and help them learn to care for something. Juvenile offenders also learn the basics of gardening and develop employable skills in addition to actually growing produce. There is an opportunity to link gardening and cooking by having the youth prepare the vegetables they grow.

Not all facilities have space for a physical garden. Container gardens are an excellent alternative. Produce can be grown in pots, garbage cans, 2-liter bottles, or big garbage bags.

Not only do the teens learn the basics of gardening, but they are also working together as a team on a project. Belonging to a group and working for something good is invaluable to these teens. Gardening also provides a great opportunity for service learning. Giving the produce to a community food bank or raising pumpkins for low-income families are excellent ways for teens to think beyond themselves and develop a sense of compassion and community connection—features that serve to put youth on a positive trajectory according to the Tufts study.

**A range of activities to build self-esteem and resourcefulness**

Essentially, any pro-social skill is valuable to teen juvenile offenders. Learning interview skills,

completing job applications, tying a tie, sewing on a button, or making holiday cookies and gingerbread houses are all worthwhile activities. The most important thing to remember is the big picture, using positive youth development to help these youth become contributing members of society. Learning to cook, clean, and garden are important skills, but ultimately, these youth are increasing their self-esteem and resourcefulness by participating in these activities.

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