

Building relationships with  
detained young people to  
improve pro-social outcomes

Key learning from research



**OBERSTOWN CHILDREN DETENTION CAMPUS, LUSK, CO. DUBLIN**  
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## ABOUT OBERSTOWN CHILDREN DETENTION CAMPUS

The Oberstown Children Detention Campus (Oberstown) in Ireland is a national facility providing a safe and secure environment to young people under the age of 18 who have been sentenced by the courts. In December 2014, the Centre for Effective Services (CES) was commissioned to help Oberstown to identify ways of building effective relationships between staff and young people in detention by learning from 'what works' in similar settings. In a situation where there is limited available evidence of strategies that are most likely to lead to positive outcomes for young people, Oberstown is committed to incorporating the most hopeful and the most effective policies and practices.

## BACKGROUND TO THIS REVIEW

This short review draws out key practical messages for improving outcomes for young people in detention. Success depends on a number of factors, the most important of which is the willingness of young people to engage positively with staff. A young person's development stage is the starting point for relationship building. In detention settings, this stage may include the absence of maturity, resistance to change, and trauma history, either as victims or offenders. This can be challenging for staff, who will need access to effective management, supervision, peer support and appropriate learning and development opportunities.

## THREE LEVELS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

The review suggests that building relationships and successfully engaging detained young people is about purposeful activity on three interconnected levels:

### LEVEL 1

involves informal yet still constructive, face-to-face interactions between staff and young people.

### LEVEL 2

involves young people and staff participating together in specific and structured activities such as arts and sport.

### LEVEL 3

consists of participation in more specialised interventions.

There is an art and a science to relationship building. The art involves commitment, enthusiasm, and perseverance in the face of difficulties, a willingness to be flexible and the capacity to come up with creative solutions. The science comes from attention to research and other forms of evidence gathering, including consultation and learning from practical experience. The various elements of relationship building are outlined in the accompanying diagram. These elements can result in measurable improvements in important outcome areas including:

- communication skills
- confidence and agency
- planning and problem-solving
- relationships
- creativity and imagination
- self-control
- health and well-being.

## KEY LEARNING FROM RESEARCH

The review outlines learning in six key areas, which can help relationship building between staff and young people. The following may be useful to people working with young people in detention.

### 1. DEVELOPING PRO-SOCIAL SKILLS:

Approaches that build skills to help young people interact effectively with their social environment have the best chance of success.

### 2. PROVIDING A VARIETY OF ACTIVITIES:

Good educational, skill-building and rehabilitative programmes, delivered by positive and proactive staff, are crucial factors in helping young people desist from crime. Recreational and other structured activities can help young people to develop socially and emotionally.

### 3. BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STAFF AND YOUNG PEOPLE:

Establishing and maintaining good quality relationships between staff and young people can help to discourage criminal behaviour and improves young people's ability to manage their own behaviour.

### 4. ATTENDING TO SYSTEMS AND SUPPORTS:

Practices, programmes and interventions are more likely to make a positive difference when they are part of a coherent and explicit organisational framework.

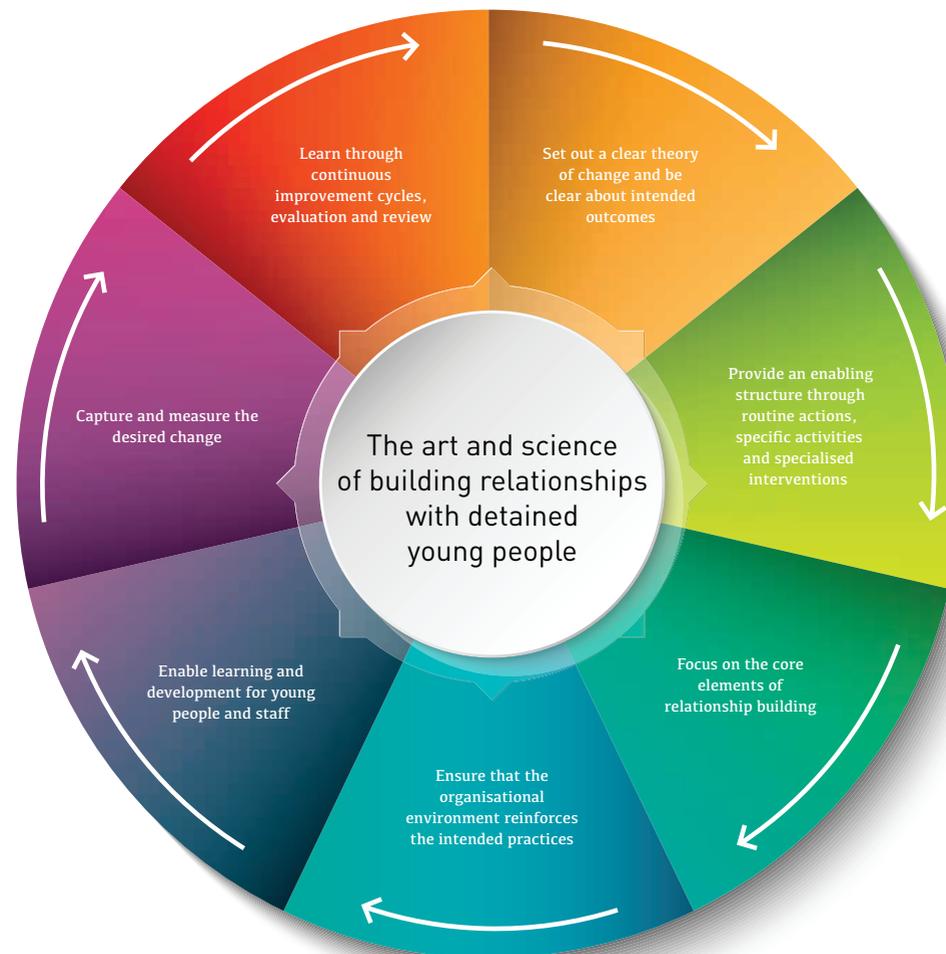
## 5. ENSURING PROGRAMME QUALITY:

Sufficient time plus the quality of the interactions with staff are crucial to the success of developmental work. Therapeutic models can reduce the incidence of aggression and/or need to use restraint. Self evaluation activities illustrate a commitment to quality and to improving practice.

## 6. PROVIDING STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT:

Staff need access to supports such as supervision, mentoring, coaching and peer review processes. Staff development activities are enhanced when they are part of an organisational commitment to continuous improvement.

FIG.1 'A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING'



To read the full report 'Lessons from the literature: building relationships with detained young people to improve pro-social outcomes' visit [www.oberstown.com](http://www.oberstown.com)