

Changing Practice in Juvenile Probation: Training & Professional Development

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Overview

Aligning juvenile probation policies and practices with research could increase public safety and success rates among justice-involved youth, help agencies use resources more efficiently, and improve outcomes for the hundreds of thousands of youth on probation supervision each year. This fact sheet is one of several Urban [publications](#) intended to help juvenile probation agencies and officers adopt a research-informed approach to supervision, an approach grounded in the best information available about effective programs and practices.

Mindset, Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

A research-informed approach to juvenile probation services individualizes responses and plans for youth. Successfully applying this approach requires staff who understand how to respond to needs, how to problem-solve across circumstances, and how to tailor their approach to different cultural contexts. In other words, the approach requires some practice and guidance. Supervisors and administrators must also have similar mindset, knowledge, skills, and abilities to support frontline staff in correctly applying and mastering the needed competencies. Supervisors and other leaders will need additional training before other staff to support the change most effectively. The timing, content, and intensity of training and other supports will differ for staff at varying levels and in different roles. Research suggests that supervisors and other leaders can better support their staff through the change process if they receive support for developing their own competencies, competencies that include the following:

- Understanding the reasons for the change
- Learning the substance of the materials
- Managing a change process
- Coaching staff (which is different than supervising them)

The following sections touch on the mindset, knowledge, skills, and abilities that will help juvenile probation agencies implement a research-informed approach.

Assess, Align, and Support Staff Competencies

When new practices are introduced, many organizations begin by thinking about providing training to staff on the new practices. Fully integrating the practices and competencies, however, requires a more comprehensive approach including (1) identifying needed competencies, (2) assessing the extent to which staff already possess these competencies or need to build new ones, (3) setting expectations about the importance these competencies and timelines for mastering them, and (4) creating systems to help staff attain and improve competencies. In this fact sheet, we focus on systems to help staff attain and improve competencies.

Support Professional Development for Current Staff

Supporting staff with the resources, time, and opportunities to develop new competencies is an important early step in the implementation process. Successful professional development strategies use multiple phases of training, coaching, and individualized feedback. Evidence is growing that in addition to training and coaching focused on building knowledge, juvenile justice professionals need the opportunity to test their new knowledge and then to ask questions to gain confidence using their skills.

Although training is not recommended as a stand-alone strategy, more effective training practices include:

- Clear justification for why the change is being made
- Demonstrations of how skills and principles can be applied in various settings and interactions
- Active learning techniques such as role-playing, modeling, and reflections on perceptions
- Peer discussion allowing staff to raise fears or anxieties and get support to address them
- Supplementary training materials including online materials, brochures, or newsletters that staff can reflect on at their own pace
- Regular retraining or booster trainings based on areas where staff are having trouble mastering the skills

Coaching is an important strategy for supporting juvenile justice professionals by recognizing each person’s unique knowledge, attitudes, skills, and motivations, and developing individualized learning plans. Leaders developing coaching strategies should consider:

- Coaching and supervising are not the same thing. Supervisors can be effective coaches, but they need to be trained on how to do it. Coaching will not succeed if staff are worried that revealing their weaknesses will count against them
- Good management information systems support better coaching. Coaches can be more effective if they can access data independently to review staff actions
- Allocation of sufficient time for staff and coaches is needed. One of the biggest barriers to making change is having sufficient time to learn new things. Staff typically cannot control their own workloads so they need leaders thinking about how to moderate caseloads to provide time for learning

KEY STEPS FOR ASSESSING, ALIGNING, AND SUSTAINING STAFF COMPETENCIES



Provide Ongoing Review and Feedback

Mastering the new competencies will take time. It is important to provide ongoing review and feedback that emphasizes a continuous quality improvement process for everyone. Developing or rewriting existing policies to align with new parameters can lay a strong foundation of transparency and communication supportive of staff morale. Research suggests the following strategies:

- Clearly define the performance requirements for staff at each level and share with all staff
- Regularly assess staff performance, including case reviews and observations of interactions between probation officers, youth, and families focusing on tone of voice, body language, and the substance of the meetings
- Provide staff regular feedback
- Tie performance reviews and raises directly to the new policies and practices

CORE COMPETENCIES OF A RESEARCH-INFORMED APPROACH TO JUVENILE PROBATION

Mindset	Knowledge	Skills	Abilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ ongoing learning ■ a strengths-based approach ■ cultural responsiveness ■ data-driven decisionmaking ■ promoting positive developmental outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ adolescent development ■ principles of effective practice ■ Risk-Needs-Responsivity ■ positive youth development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ communication ■ interpersonal skills ■ interviewing ■ judgment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ building trust with youth and caregivers ■ model prosocial behavior ■ identify and collaborate with community partners ■ coordinate community resources ■ administer and use RNA model ■ apply responses and incentives