

Life-coaching – a different way to empower young offenders

Baillie Aaron brings encouraging results from Spark Inside

Here's a familiar story. Jamie was 16 years old and in Feltham Young Offenders' Institution when he first joined Spark Inside's 'through the gates' programme. Like many of his peers he dealt drugs and committed property offences before incarceration. He was not in school, lacked a strong support network and this was his third time in prison.

Jamie reported that after his previous custodial sentences, he would usually be running from the police within a week of release. This time, however, Jamie felt differently: he reported that after gaining clarity on his goals through coaching, he now had no inclination to return to crime. He identified a desire to work in a restaurant, and building on coaching's ethos of empowered self-sufficiency, he returned to his local high street and without any external support, asked every restaurant for a job until he secured one as a waiter.

Jamie's story, unfortunately, is an anomaly.

Despite the high cost of custody (up to £206,000 per young person per year), 75% of young people leaving custody reoffend within two years of release. Yet, according to a survey conducted by NACRO in 2004, 66% of young people in custody show signs of motivation to positively change their behaviour. The stark contrast between reoffending rates and these young people's desire to change signifies the need for an approach to rehabilitation that more effectively channels young people's desire to change into decreased reoffending.

Life coaching: empowering young offenders to solve their own problems

Spark Inside, a London-based charity, is the only provider of this innovative way of tackling the cultural and social causes of youth reoffending through life coaching. The charity has based its programme on a similar model in Ontario, Canada: the PACT Urban Peace Programme. PACT partners with the juvenile courts to coach serious, prolific young offenders. Of the total number of clients who complete PACT's life coaching programme, nearly half (43%) do not reoffend during the year-long intervention, leading to a return of £200 for every £1 invested.

Coaches do not mentor, counsel, advise, share personal experiences, or offer treatment but help clients devise their own solutions to problems by asking powerful questions that engage clients in guided self-reflection around values, motivations and goals. Because clients (not coaches) are considered to be the experts, coaching is holistic (addressing multiple and complex needs) and topics can range from education and employment to reoffending and substance misuse.

Spark Inside offers one-to-one life coaching as well as a multi-part coaching workshop to clients aged 15-25 in Greater London or Kent, who are identified as having a high risk of reoffending. Referrals are

currently made by prison or probation officers. Spark Inside's coaches have coaching qualifications and significant professional coaching experience.

Independent evaluation shows 0% reoffending rate

In 2013, Spark Inside piloted its one-to-one coaching programme with eight teenage boys nearing release from YOIs Feltham and Cookham Wood. An independent evaluation of the pilot, conducted by the University of Cambridge's Institute of Criminology, shows early signs of promise for coaching as a rehabilitative intervention. Six months after Spark Inside's coaching clients had left prison, the reoffending rate was 0% and 50% of clients were engaged in education, employment and training, with the other half actively looking.

Spark Inside's model has been informed by evidence-based policy, as well as the experience of youth and adults with criminal records, academics, and criminal justice practitioners. Coaching has been

shown to increase goal attainment, enhance resilience, ameliorate depression and stress, and increase well-being. It can also reduce emotional difficulties, antisocial behaviour, and drug and alcohol misuse. At-risk youths receiving coaching were more likely to have higher levels of self-esteem and aspirations; attend school, work and training; obtain vocational qualifications; apply for and attend job interviews; resolve debts; and apply for social housing.

Next steps

Building on the success of its first programme with teenage offenders, Spark Inside aims to pilot its coaching programme with 18-to-25 year-old men and women in London prisons this year. In addition, it has been commissioned by NOMS for a major project reducing institutional violence among young adults in prison through a multi-part coaching workshop. Over the next three years, Spark Inside aspires to support high-risk young people serving community sentences with youth offending teams or probation to support a reduction in custodial sentences.

In order to more closely achieve its goal of best supporting young people, Spark Inside aspires to work more closely with judges and magistrates.

This is an edited article – see the website for the full submission.

Baillie Aaron is the Executive Director of Spark Inside. Thanks to Nicole Berg for her assistance in research.

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