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GUIDELINE

FOR

YOUTH WORKERS

Erasmus + Project: Youth Reintegration through Enhanced Adolescent Cross-disciplinary Help
Acronym: Y REACH

ERASMUS+ KA220-YOU - Cooperation Partnerships in Youth

Co-funded by the European Union

Y-REACH

Erasmus+ JEUNESSE & SPORT

Y REACH: Youth Reintegration through Enhanced Adolescent Cross-disciplinary Help

ERASMUS+ KA220-YOU - Cooperation Partnerships in Youth

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INTRODUCTION

Young people who are at risk of offending or who have already come into contact with the justice system often face multiple and interconnected challenges, including adverse childhood experiences, family instability, social exclusion, educational difficulties, trauma, and limited access to supportive services. These experiences can affect their emotional regulation, decision-making, relationships, and opportunities for successful participation in society. At the same time, adolescence represents a period of remarkable growth, learning, and resilience, during which timely support and positive relationships can significantly influence future life trajectories.

Developed within the Erasmus+ project **Y REACH – Youth Reintegration through Enhanced Adolescent Cross-disciplinary Help**, this guideline provides youth workers with practical, evidence-informed approaches to support the reintegration, personal development, and social inclusion of vulnerable young people. The handbook combines current knowledge from neuroscience, restorative justice, life and work skills development, art therapy, and community engagement to help professionals better understand adolescent behaviour and respond with empathy, structure, and effectiveness.
Rather than viewing challenging behaviour simply as misconduct, the guideline encourages youth workers to understand the influence of brain development, stress, trauma, and environmental factors on young people's actions. It emphasizes that while adolescents remain responsible for their choices, adults play a crucial role in creating safe, predictable, and supportive environments where emotional regulation, learning, accountability, and positive change can occur.

The handbook also highlights the value of restorative justice as a constructive approach that promotes responsibility, dialogue, repair of harm, and reintegration instead of exclusion. Alongside restorative practices, it introduces practical tools for de-escalation, communication, emotional regulation, creative expression, and the development of life and employability skills that strengthen young people's resilience and capacity for positive participation in their communities.

Ultimately, this guideline aims to strengthen the knowledge, confidence, and practical skills of youth workers who support adolescents in vulnerable situations. By integrating scientific evidence with practical experience and person-centred approaches, it provides a comprehensive resource that promotes respectful relationships, informed decision-making, and opportunities for young people to rebuild trust, develop their potential, and become active members of their communities.

CHAPTER 1 JUVENILE DELINQUENCY - OPTIMAL DIVERSION STRATEGIES FOR YOUNG OFFENDERS



The "Youth Reintegration through Enhanced Adolescent Cross-disciplinary Help" (Y-REACH) project, funded by the Erasmus+ programme (Agreement No. 2024-2-FR02-KA220-YOU-000286733), addresses the critical need for innovative and sustainable reintegration programs for young offenders across Europe. This project is a collaborative effort between partners from France, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia, aimed at bridging the gap between traditional disciplinary methods and the complex, multifaceted needs of youth at risk.

Module 1 serves as the foundational pillar of the Cross-disciplinary Adolescent Diversion Program (ADP). It explores the current landscape of juvenile delinquency through a comparative lens, analyzing the diverse socio-economic and systemic factors that drive youth crime in our partner regions—from the high-volume, societal-driven challenges in France to the economic and "anti-social" behavior focus in Bulgaria and North Macedonia.

The core philosophy of this module is rooted in the "Public Health Model" for crime prevention, emphasizing primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions. By shifting the focus from purely punitive measures to "Optimal Diversion Strategies," this module equips youth workers with the tools to implement restorative justice, vocational training, and mental health support.

Our ultimate goal is to reduce recidivism by fostering protective factors - such as stable adult bonds and educational success - that allow young offenders to reintegrate successfully AND contribute positively to their communities.



Comparative Juvenile Statistics (2024 Data)

The following table synthesizes data from the French Ministry of Justice, the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute (NSI), and the State Statistical Office of North Macedonia.

Indicator	France	Bulgaria	North Macedonia
Total Reported Offenders	~121,995 (Prosecutable cases)	8,430 (Registered in CPRs*)	486 (Reported child offenders)
Convicted/Sentenced	~28,548 (Misdemeanors)	781 (Aged 14–17)	300 (Convicted)
Primary Crime Types	Drug trafficking, severe violence	Thefts (42%), Anti-social acts	Property crimes, physical violence
Year-on-Year Trend	Stabilizing (but rising violence)	**Slight Decrease** (-1.1%)	**Stable** (Reports ~480-500)
Gender (Male/Female)	Heavily Male (~80%+)	78% Male / 22% Female	~60% Male / 40% Female (Victims)

**CPRs: Child Pedagogic Rooms (Bulgaria's specialized units for monitoring minors).*





National Analysis & Trends

1. **France: High Volume & Shifting Severity**

France manages a massive juvenile justice infrastructure compared to its Balkan counterparts.

- **The Discernment Threshold:** French law (as of 2024/25) maintains a refutable presumption that children under **13** lack discernment. No penalties are applied below this age, only educational measures.
- **"Fewer but Fiercer":** While the total number of juvenile suspects has declined by roughly **14–18%** since 2016, the Ministry of Justice notes a rise in the "severity" of acts, particularly involving drug-related "settling of scores" and urban violence.
- **Systemic Load:** In 2024, approximately **105,472** minors were subject to either prosecution or alternative educational measures, highlighting a "prosecution-heavy" approach to delinquency.

2. **Bulgaria: The "Anti-Social" Monitoring System**

Bulgaria's approach is unique due to the **Child Pedagogic Rooms (CPRs)**, which track children for behaviors that might not be criminal but are considered "publicly dangerous."

- **Property Focus:** Theft remains the dominant crime (42% of cases), specifically shoplifting and home thefts.
- **Correctional Measures:** Rather than prison, the most common outcome in 2024 was a **Warning** (46.1%) or placement under the control of a "public tutor" (20.3%).
- **Rehabilitation:** Interestingly, over **1,400 children** were removed from official monitoring in 2024 specifically due to "improved behavior," suggesting a high success
- rate for local intervention.

3. **North Macedonia: Small Scale, High Conversion**

Despite having the smallest population, North Macedonia's data shows a high rate of formal judicial processing.

- **Conviction Density:** Of the 486 children reported to authorities in 2024, **300 were convicted**. This indicates that once a case enters the system, it is highly likely to result in a formal verdict.
- **Demographic Pressure:** UNICEF reports for 2024/25 highlight that while crime numbers are low, the child population has shrunk by **18%** since 2011. This makes the relative impact of each delinquency case more significant on the shrinking workforce.
- **Online Risks:** There has been a doubling of reports related to the digital abuse of children, which authorities are now linking to the rise in "cyber-delinquency" among tech-savvy youth.

Key Takeaways

- **Social Context:** In Bulgaria and North Macedonia, juvenile crime is largely **economic** (theft/poverty-driven). In France, it is increasingly **societal** (organized crime, radical violence).
- **Reporting:** France reports on "prosecutable perpetrators," while Bulgaria includes "anti-social acts" (like running away or begging), making Bulgaria's numbers appear higher relative to population than they are in terms of "serious crime."

According to UNICEF's latest reporting for the 2024–2025 cycle, juvenile justice in Europe is defined by a shift toward **diversion** (keeping kids out of court) and a growing concern over **online crime and mental health**.

While general juvenile detention rates have decreased globally, UNICEF highlights that **Eastern Europe** still faces unique "second-generation" challenges, such as high dropout rates and digital exploitation.

UNICEF Comparative Overview: 2024/25 Context

Category	UNICEF Regional Observations (Europe)	Focus: North Macedonia & Balkans	Focus: France & Western Europe
System Goal	Decarceration & Child-friendly justice	High "conversion" (reports to convictions)	Focus on radical violence & drug networks
Detention Rate	**15 per 100,000** (Avg.)	Lower raw numbers; focus on small group homes	Higher detention due to violent crime spikes
Emerging Risk	Digital abuse & cyber-delinquency	Rapid rise in child victims (up 41%)	Recruitment into gangs via social media
UNICEF Action	Mental health integration in justice	Reform of Social Work Centers	Diversion for minor/first-time offenses



Analysis of UNICEF Reports for 2024/25

1. North Macedonia: The Gap in Social Protection

In its **2024 Situation Analysis**, UNICEF North Macedonia pointed out a significant discrepancy:

- **The Data Gap:** The Ministry of Interior recorded **740 child victims** of crime in 2023/24, but Social Work Centers only reported **212**. UNICEF warns that this gap means many children "in conflict with the law" are not receiving the mandatory social support they need during the justice process.
- **Reform Success:** UNICEF praised the introduction of **individual plans** for youth in small group homes, moving away from old-style "correctional institutions."

2. Bulgaria: The "Pedagogic" Approach

UNICEF's regional findings for 2024 suggest that Bulgaria's use of **Child Pedagogic Rooms (CPRs)** acts as a double-edged sword:

- **Early Intervention:** It successfully keeps thousands of children out of formal court by labeling acts as "anti-social" rather than "criminal."
- **The Downside:** UNICEF advocates for more **specialized legal aid**, as children in these informal systems sometimes lack the full legal protections found in a formal courtroom.

3. France: The "Discernment" Debate

UNICEF France has been vocal about the 2024/25 trends regarding the **age of criminal responsibility**:

- **Age 13:** UNICEF continues to monitor France's strict adherence to the 13-year-old threshold for "discernment."
- **Violence vs. Rights:** While the government reported a "rejuvenation of violence," UNICEF emphasizes that the root causes—exclusion and lack of mental health services—must be addressed before increasing penalties.

Key UNICEF Trends for 2025

- **Mental Health Crisis:** UNICEF and the WHO released new guidance in late 2024 stating that **1 in 7** adolescents (10–19) face mental health conditions, which is now a primary driver of delinquency in Europe.
- **Digital Harm:** There is a "two-way relationship" between online consumption of violent content and offline aggression, particularly among boys in Europe.





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which is expressed through the violation of laws, social standards, values, and

The most common **antisocial behaviors** are:

- **Running away from home** (in the case of domestic violence, intolerance, alcohol, drugs, sexual violence in family, or they run away due to forbidden love, or intention to get married).
- **Wandering** (from the same reason previously stated, the difference is that they return home at night either sleeping at friends houses or in abandoned buildings)
- **Begging** (mainly for financial reasons)
- Addiction to **gambling** in sports betting, online betting etc.

Young offenders act mainly alone or in groups of up to 3 people, but also in larger groups.
In large groups, they commit **vandalism** in public places, such as demolishing bars, cars, restaurants, sports events, concerts, cemeteries, as well as mutual confrontations between juvenile gangs.

Causes of Juvenile Delinquency

To prevent minors from committing criminal offenses and misdemeanors, the reasons why minors commit them must be determined.

There are four main factors for the occurrence of juvenile delinquency.

1.Socio-Economic and State-Level Factors

- The socio-economic crisis in the state impoverishment of society, unemployment, nepotism, injustice, negative selection, poor finances, and the inability to satisfy the basic needs of citizens.
- **Instability in the state** due to various crises, such as military crises, and the influx of refugees and migrants.
- Situations like the **Corona virus epidemic** and the long isolation caused enormous damage to interpersonal relations, especially in **dysfunctional families**, where the most vulnerable the children suffered the most.

Previously mentoned reasons lead to an increase in **sociopathological phenomena** and the antisocial and criminal behavior of young people.



2. Family Factors

The **family** is the basic social structure where socialization, personality formation, and upbringing take place.

The family is a natural environment for the development of children, where they should be provided with protection, help, and an atmosphere of stability, love, attention, and security.

In modern society, the family faces a more intense weakening of its basic function, and its actions can negatively affect personality development if there are:

- **Disrupted family relationships**, parents who are too busy with business or living abroad
- **Conflicts**, **aggression**
- **Divorce**
- **Death of a parent** or family member
- **Parents who are involved in crime or antisocial behaviors.**
- Presence of **alcoholism**, **drug addiction**, or any kind of **violence** (physical, psychological, and sexual)
- **Neglect** or **abandonment of children** (hunger, lack of care, poor hygiene), etc.
- **Unfavorable financial conditions** in the family, the inability to satisfy daily needs, as well as the increased needs of minors who want the latest mobile phones, modern clothes, etc.

The aforementioned often influences young people to quickly and easily engage in criminal activities.

The role of parents in prevention is very important. Parents exert the greatest influence on their children through personal example. Parents can exert a very good, but also a very bad influence as an example.

Children see everything, feel everything that happens in the family and cannot be deceived. If parent says one thing, and does another in front of their children, such

behaviors confuse children, teach them to lie and manipulate from a young age and such a parent has no authority over the child.

Children realize that they can trust neither their parents nor other people. Also, these children do not feel protected and safe.

Parents who commit crimes are bad example because their children often follow their example and they also start breaking the law from a young age simply by copying the behavior of one or both parents.

If a child is lucky that his parents are people who work on personal development and through personal example they show respect for the people around them, respect for the child, do honest work, have cultural and kind behavior and when they make mistakes, they admit them to the child and correct them in front of the child, with this kind of behavior and upbringing, they are good examples that the child also copies.

1. **Personality Characteristics**

- Difficulties in **emotional and social maturation**
- Experienced **stress** and **trauma**
- Lack of **self-respect**
- **Negative identification** with people who are known criminals
- **Negative peer influence** and reduced communication skills
- **Distrust** of strangers
- Desire for **domination**, **passivity**, **limited interests**, **insecurity**, **untrustworthiness**
- Absence of **guilt** and **shame**
- **Disrespect for authority**

2. **Environmental Factors**



The **environment** factor includes the influences of the minor's surroundings:

- **Bad company (**socializing with people who are known criminals), life on the street, unorganized free time.
- **Unlimited viewing of TV**, playing computer and mobile phone games.
- Their prolonged and more frequent stay in **entertainment venues** and **catering facilities**, **casinos**, and **sports betting shops**, where they are exposed to a large number of negative influences that contribute to **deviant behavior**.
- The **influence of mass media**, which for commercial purposes broadcast TV and radio programs that contain harmful content for young people.
- **Insufficient engagement of schools** and other educational institutions; the **neglected educational component** is a significant factor.
- Suffering **bullying** at school through insults, belittling, ridicule, ignoring, exclusion, physical, psychological and sexual assault, and harassment.
- All these pressures often lead to **alcohol abuse**, **drug abuse**, **tranquilizer abuse**, **gambling**, **sports betting**, **fast loans**, and **debts to loan sharks**.
- The **bad influence of social networks**, which promote an unrealistic, false, and far from reality "perfection." Social networks publish so-called "**challenges**" that are massively spread and promoted, leading to a worrying number of minors who self-harm, losing their lives, or injuring or killing other people (Example in Serbia).
- **Promote hatred online,** most often towards people of different origin, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, physical appearance.
- Also **watching videos and movies with violence and indecent content and violent video games**, lead to the glorification of violence and pornography, self-deception, failure to recognize reality, absence of moral values, isolation, loss of self-confidence, and diseases such as depression, anxiety, anorexia, bulimia, excessive body weight, fear of open spaces, fear of other people, the conviction that they are not normal, that they are ugly, the conviction that physical appearance and wealth are everything, and that other values are insignificant.

All of the above leads some minors to commit criminal offenses and misdemeanors. Others become unable to leave home, communicate with people, or live independently, and often attempt or commit suicide.

Institutions and Procedure



The **institutions** responsible for treating minors who have broken the law are:

- **Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA)**
- **Center for Social Work**
- **Public Prosecutor's Office**
- **Court**
- **Educational institutions**.

The **role of the police (MIA)** is to act upon the report that a minor has committed a criminal offense. They collect evidence and immediately inform: the parents or guardians, the Center for Social Work, and the Public Prosecutor's Office. The police also submit a **Written Notification** to the Center for Social Work and the Public Prosecutor's Office.

L**awyer**, who is mandatory, is called and paid for by the parents, and if they do not have the finances, the Center for Social Work provides and pays for one.

The **Center for Social Work** acts upon the notification of the MIA. Within 15 days, a professional team from the Center for Social Work (pedagogue, psychologist, social worker, lawyer, and attorney) conducts a conversation with the minor and their parents/guardians. It creates a plan for the implementation of measures for assistance and protection and submits a report to the Public Prosecutor's Office and the MIA.

The **role of the Public Prosecutor's Office** is to prepare an indictment and hand it over to the court for further proceedings.

The competent **Court** makes an appropriate decision for the minor, assessing primarily the report submitted by the Center for Social Work.

Unlike adult courts, juvenile courts operate under less stringent evidentiary standards and are designed to prioritize the well-being of the youth involved, often adopting a more supportive and parental role.

Differences in Determining Criminal Responsibility in the Legal System of North Macedonia."

The differences in determining criminal responsibility between minor offenders under 18 and adult offenders are as follows:

- For **minors who have not reached the age of 14** at the time of the offense, **sanctions are not applied**. Only **measures for assistance and protection** are applied, implemented by the Center for Social Work.
- For **minor offenders aged 14–16**, **educational measures** are applied (reprimand, measures of increased supervision, and institutional measures).

- For **minor offenders aged 16–18**, **alternative measures** are applied (suspended sentence, conditional suspension of an already imposed measure, and community service).
- For minor offenders, **security measures** are provided (mandatory psychiatric treatment in an institution, mandatory psychiatric treatment in freedom, mandatory treatment for addiction).
- For **minor offenders aged 16–18** who have committed **more serious criminal offenses** or are **recidivists**, **punishments** are provided (imprisonment for children, fine, driving prohibition for a motor vehicle, and expulsion of a foreigner, if applicable).
- Minor offenders who have committed misdemeanors are subject to sanctions provided for by the **Law on misdemeanors**, which are mainly fines.

All the stated procedures are valid only for persons **up to 18 years of age**.

- For all perpetrators who have reached the age of 18, the usual procedure provided by the **Law on Criminal Procedure** is applied.

Recidivism in Minors

According to the criminal law definition, **recidivism** represents the repeated commission of criminal offenses by a person who has previously been convicted of one or more offenses of the same or different type.

The most common **criminogenic factors** on which the appearance of recidivism depends are mainly divided into two factors:

1. **Personality as a factor**
2. **Social factors**

These are essentially the same factors that were previously listed as factors for the occurrence of juvenile delinquency. The effectiveness of all treatment methods is measured by the number of recidivists.

This means that all the previously listed reasons as key to the occurrence of juvenile offenders are important to review again.

This is very important to see how much work has been done on those reasons, to remove them or at least reduce them.

Of course, different reasons influenced each minor to become a delinquent, it is individual. Each of them also behaves differently after completing the measures or sentence imposed by a court.

If the minor, after serving his sentence, continues to associate and spends his free time with the same people, the family situation remained the same, hi did not

continue education, he found new “friends” in institution where he was by court decision, it means that the institutions that worked with him have failed and he will become a recidivist.

Considering the growing body of research we now know that the better and more effective to prevent minors from committing crimes is early intervention.

Early intervention prevents the onset of delinquent behavior and supports the development of a youths assets and resilience. It also decreases rates of recidivism.

Intervening and preventing early not only saves minors, but also prevents the onset of adult criminal careers and reduces likelihood of youth perpetrating serious and violent offenses

The Value of a Smile

In the world we live in many children are born into places, circumstances, and conditions that do not grant them equal chances for safe growth, progress, and success in life. They bear no guilt for being born into such environments. Because life is cruel to them from their earliest years, they often become hardened just to survive, frequently turning toward violence and crime.

Working with these youths is difficult. We, the professionals who work with them, know this best. **But**, we also know that if we work with these young people persistently enough, slowly and without giving up, they can be saved.

Then comes the day when these children, who never smiled before, come to you with a smile that radiates from their faces and illuminates everything around them. In that moment, you realize there is no greater reward or achievement than that smile.





Optimal Diversion Strategies for Young Offenders

Prevention is the most effective way to address juvenile delinquency because it tackles the **root causes** of behavior before a child enters the criminal justice system. Research from 2024 and 2025 across Europe suggests that for every dollar or euro spent on prevention, societies save significantly more in future costs related to policing, courts, and incarceration.

Why Prevention is Crucial

Prevention isn't just about stopping a crime; it's about changing a child's life trajectory. Here is why it is considered the gold standard in modern justice:

- **Cost-Effectiveness:** Maintaining a minor in a detention center is vastly more expensive than funding a community sports program or a school counselor.
- **Breaking the Cycle:** Children who enter the justice system early are statistically more likely to become adult offenders. Prevention "breaks the pipe" between youth trouble and lifelong criminality.
- **Addressing Trauma:** Most juvenile delinquency stems from "Adverse Childhood Experiences" (ACEs), such as domestic violence, neglect, or poverty. Prevention identifies these early.

Key Pillars of Effective Prevention

Effective prevention happens in three main layers, often visualized as a "Prevention Triangle" or "Public Health Model" for crime.

1. Primary Prevention (Universal)

This is aimed at **all** children to create a healthy environment.

- **Education:** Ensuring high school completion rates.
- **Community:** Safe parks, youth clubs, and after-school programs that provide "positive boredom" outlets.
- **Family Support:** Programs that teach parenting skills and provide financial stability.

2. Secondary Prevention (At-Risk)

This targets children who show early warning signs, such as chronic truancy (skipping school) or minor "anti-social" acts.

- **Mentorship:** Pairing at-risk youth with positive adult role models.

- **Mental Health:** Screening for ADHD, conduct disorders, or substance abuse.
- **Digital Literacy:** Teaching children how to navigate online peer pressure and recruitment by gangs.

3. Tertiary Prevention (Diversion)

This is for children who have already committed a minor offense.

- **Restorative Justice:** Instead of a jail cell, the child meets the victim to understand the harm caused.
- **Vocational Training:** Giving the minor a "way out" through job skills and employment.



According to UNICEF and the WHO, prevention works best when it boosts **protective factors**—the things that keep a child safe:

1. **A strong bond** with at least one stable adult.
2. **Success in school** (even in non-academic areas like art or sports).
3. **A sense of belonging** to a pro-social group (a team, a club, or a hobby group).

This framework is widely recognized as the "gold standard" for child development and risk prevention. It shifts the focus from **fixing problems** to **building strengths**, which is often much more effective in the long run.

Building on those protective factors, it's helpful to look at how they function as a **psychological shield**. When UNICEF and the WHO emphasize these, they are leaning into the "Public Health Model" of prevention.

Here are a few more critical perspectives on why these three factors are the "pillars" of a healthy childhood:

1. Neurobiology: Calming the Brain

A stable adult isn't just a "friend"; they act as an external nervous system for the child.

- **The Science:** Children in high-stress environments often have overactive amydalas (the brain's alarm system). A stable adult helps "regulate" this stress. Through a process called **co-regulation**, the adult's calm demeanor helps the child's brain learn how to calm itself down.
- **Long-term impact:** This prevents the long-term physical damage caused by toxic stress.

2. The "Buffer" Effect

Success in non-academic areas (art, sports, mechanics) acts as a **buffer** against academic failure.

- **The Logic:** If a child struggles with dyslexia or math, school can become a place of constant "defeat." Without an "island of success" (like being the best drummer in the school band), that child may begin to identify as a "failure."
- **The Shift:** Success in one area proves to the child's brain: *"I am capable of learning."* This mindset eventually carries back over into the classroom.

3. Social Capital: The "Web" of Support

A pro-social group provides what sociologists call **"Social Capital."**

- **Safety in Numbers:** Being part of a team or club provides a structure of "positive peer pressure." In these groups, the "cool" thing to do is to show up, practice, and support others.
- **Identity Formation:** Adolescence is a search for identity. If the group's identity is "The Tigers Soccer Team," the child adopts those healthy values as their own identity.

CHAPTER 2 BEST PRACTICES FROM NEUROSCIENCE AND BRAIN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

THE BRAIN NEVER GROWS ALONE

How Early Experience, Environment & Culture Shape Adolescent Behavior

Introduction

To understand adolescent behavior, we must first look at how the brain learns to grow in connection with others, starting from birth.

→ The adolescent brain is not a new brain — it is a rewritten one.

→ Early experience shapes neural architecture long before adolescence.

→ Today's world accelerates development, blurring childhood and adolescence.

This guide section does not aim to label, excuse, or predict adolescent behavior. Neuroscience does not replace responsibility, boundaries, or accountability. It helps us understand **why regulation sometimes fails**, and **how adults can respond more effectively**.

Throughout this guide, neuroscience is used as a **reading tool**, not a diagnostic tool. Youth workers are not expected to identify brain deficits, but to recognize **states of regulation**, **overload or stress**, and adapt their responses accordingly.

These insights support relational and educational practices; they do not

Neuroscience & Practice – Point of Vigilance for Youth Workers

Neuroscience is not destiny.
Brain development is shaped by interaction, experience, and context.
Understanding brain mechanisms should:

1. **Inform intervention**, not replace them.
2. **Support empathy**, not remove limits.
3. **Guide co-regulation**, not justify harmful behavior.

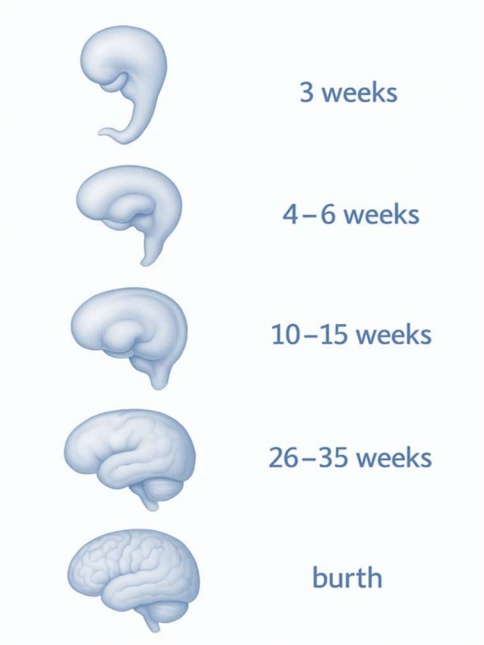
Adolescents are responsible for their actions – **adults are responsible for the conditions in which regulation becomes possible.**

replace therapeutic care or clinical intervention.

Early Brain Development (0–6 years)

The architecture of emotion, attachment & plasticity

« Early experiences affect the architecture of the developing brain» (Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University,2007).



Brain development begins in utero (prenatal stage) and continues after birth (postnatal period). Sensorimotor areas - responsible for seeing, hearing, touch, movement and breathing - mature very early, because they are essential for survival. Emotional systems such as the limbic system (amygdala, hippocampus, hypothalamus, ect.) then take shape, allowing emotional connection and memory.

The brain follows a sequential progression: the oldest structures (brainstem and limbic system) develop first, as they ensure the basic vital and emotional functions. Once these first systems - the ones responsible for survival and emotional connection - are in place, the brain begins to build its higher structures.

These upper areas - such as the prefrontal cortex - connect to these systems to regulate, plan and symbolize. **This process is not linear.** At every stage, environment, experience and social interaction either strengthen or weaken the circuits under construction. ***Two children at the same age can therefore show very different brain trajectories, depending on the quality of the attachment, cognitive stimulation, or chronic stress.***

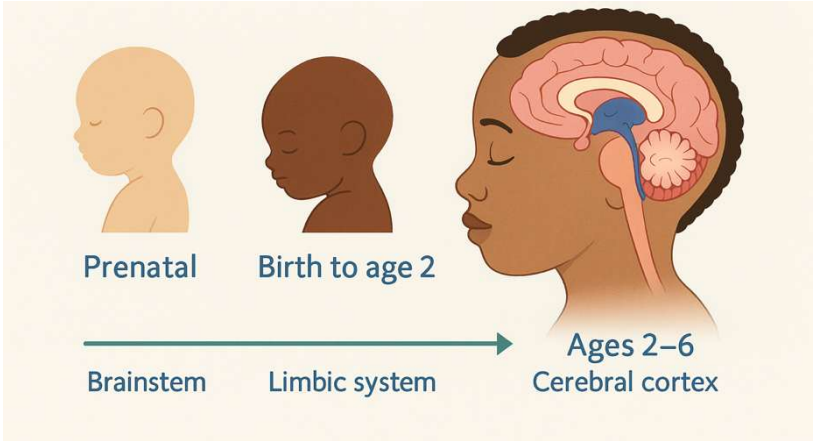


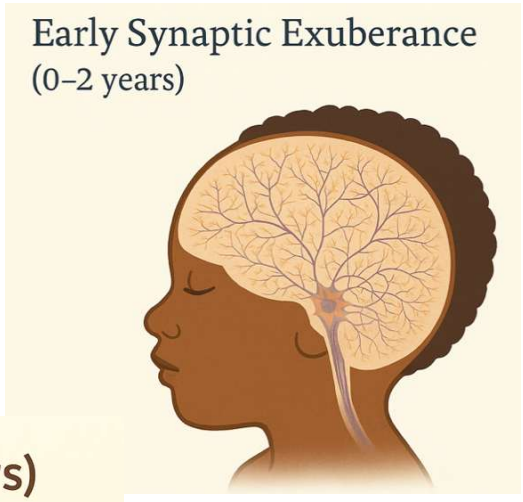
Diagram showing how brain development progresses from the brainstem and limbic system, while higher cortical areas mature later. Early experiences shape how these systems connect and regulate behavior.

The maturation of the prefrontal cortex continues throughout adolescence - for some until 25 years of age. Once the brain's basic architecture is built, the real learning begins.

From overproduction to refinement - « The synaptic pruning »

The brain starts to test, to connect, to adapt - keeping what works and letting go of what doesn't.

Before synaptic pruning, the infant brain forms an overabundance of neural connections - a transient phase of exuberant connectivity that allows experience to sculpt lasting pathways. Synaptogenesis begins prenatally and peaks during the first years of life.



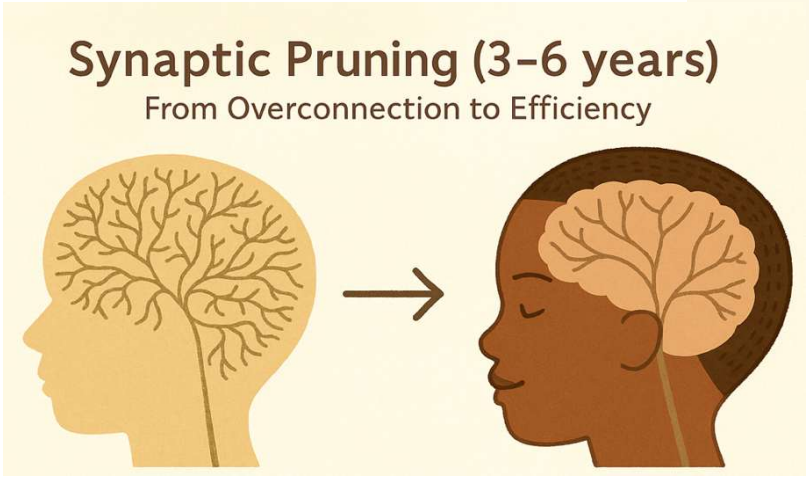


Diagram 2 Synaptic overproduction followed by pruning during early childhood. Neural circuits that are repeatedly activated are strengthened, while unused connections are eliminated. Experience determines efficiency.

Between ages 3 and 6, the brain eliminates weak or unused synapses, strengthening the circuits reinforced by experience and learning. In other words, the neural activity determines which synapses are preserved - frequently used ones become stronger while the weaker ones are marked for removal.

While the process of synaptic over-production and pruning is well-established, recent research reveals much more detailed insight into regional timing, environmental influences, and molecular mechanisms supporting this refinement. (Huttenlocher & Dabholkar, 1997 ; Petanjek et al., 2011; Fleming & McDermott, 2024)

1. By the end of early childhood, about 90% of the brain's volume is reached by age 5-6 (Lenroot & Giedd, 2006).
2. Emotional safety and attachment shape neural architecture and affect regulation (Casey et al., 2025).
3. Early adversity is linked to overactive amygdala and weakened emotion regulation (Tottenham & Sheridan, 2009; Tottenham et al., 2010; Sheridan et al., 2012).

The quality of the connections really matters now and this is what prepares the child for the next phase : efficiency, learning and self-control.

Practice Insight for Youth Workers – Early Foundations

Early experiences shape emotional regulation, but **youth workers are not responsible for what happened before.**

What matters in practice:

- Adolescents may react based on **old survival patterns**, not current intentions.
- Emotional intensity is often **a memory of past insecurity**, not a reaction to the present adult.
- Consistency, tone and predictability are more impactful than explanations.

Middle Childhood (6-12 years)

From Architecture to Efficiency

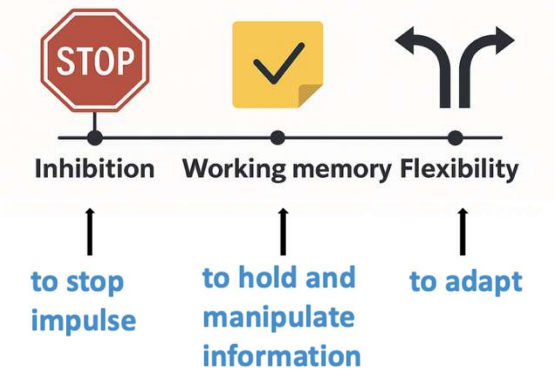
The brain starts to use what it has built - how experience turns connections into skills. Connections that were formed in early childhood start to communicate more efficiently. This is the age when children learn to focus, to plan, to control impulses - when the brain starts to balance emotion and reasoning. Plasticity doesn't disappear, it simply becomes more specialized - the brain is still learning, but now it's learning how to learn, and how to stay regulated.

Experience shapes Efficiency – The rise of executive functions

During the middle childhood, a new set of abilities begins to grow - what we call the executive functions. These are the skills that allow children to focus, to plan, to adapt, and to control their reactions.

Executive functions depend on the prefrontal cortex - the brain's control center. They help children hold information in mind, switch between tasks, and resist impulses.

This development doesn't happen overnight. It grows through daily routines, language, play, and social experiences.



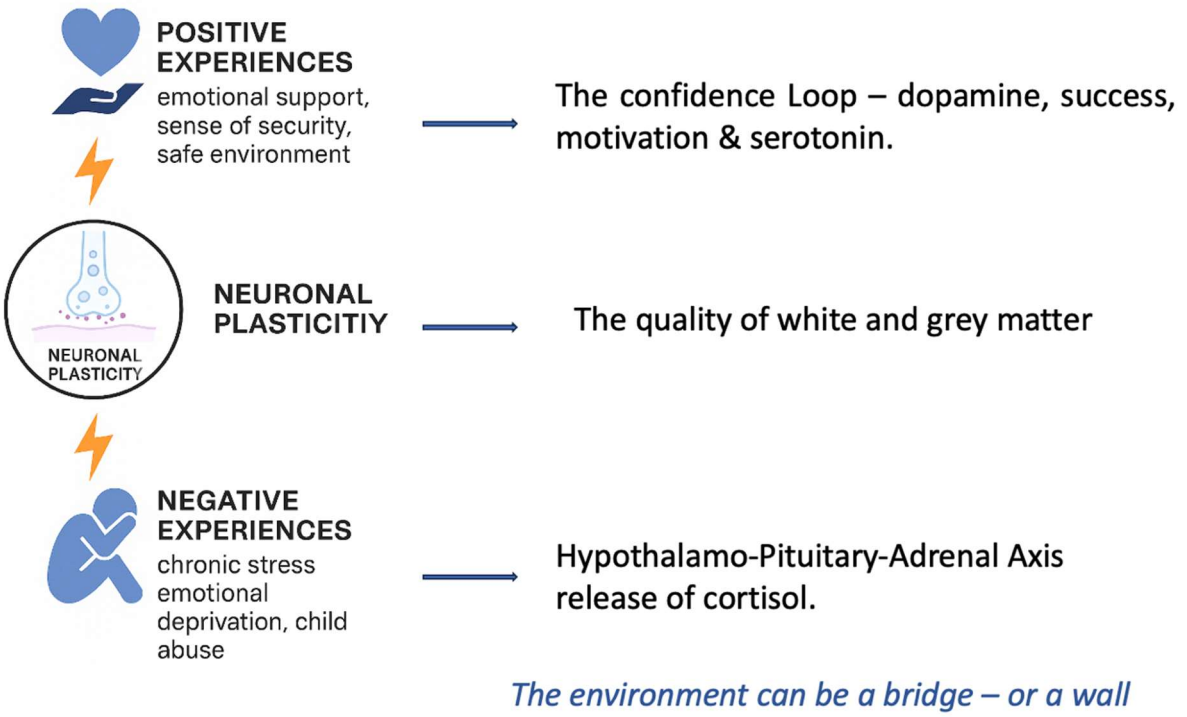
Every time a child has to wait, to try again to remember or to explain - these circuits get stronger.

At this age, environment plays a different role. It's no longer about building the brain, but about training it. Structure, predictability and positive reinforcement become the best teachers for these functions to mature. School & peers shape motivation and self-concept.

The role of the environment – When the context becomes a teacher

At this stage, the environment doesn't build the brain anymore —it shapes how efficiently it works. Every interaction, every feedback, every small success sends a message to the brain: keep going or stop trying.

When a child experiences encouragement or small victories, the brain releases dopamine. **Dopamine doesn't only create pleasure — it strengthens the connections involved in learning.** This is what we call the confidence loop — success builds motivation, and motivation builds structure.



But when stress dominates — when the environment is unpredictable, threatening, or violent — another system takes control: the hypothalamo–pituitary–adrenal axis, which floods the brain with cortisol. Chronic activation of this axis slows down neural growth and weakens the development of myelin, the substance that allows neurons to communicate quickly and efficiently.

The role of the environment is critical. It can either reinforce learning and stability or block the brain's ability to communicate within itself.

Motivational Reinforcement Loop (Dopamine & Serotonin)

During middle childhood, the brain learns through a very specific mechanism: children learn because they want to learn. **Each time a child tries something - even a small effort - the brain releases dopamine. Dopamine is not only about pleasure; it strengthens the connections involved in success. It gives energy, motivation, and the drive to try again.**

This creates what we call the motivational reinforcement loop:

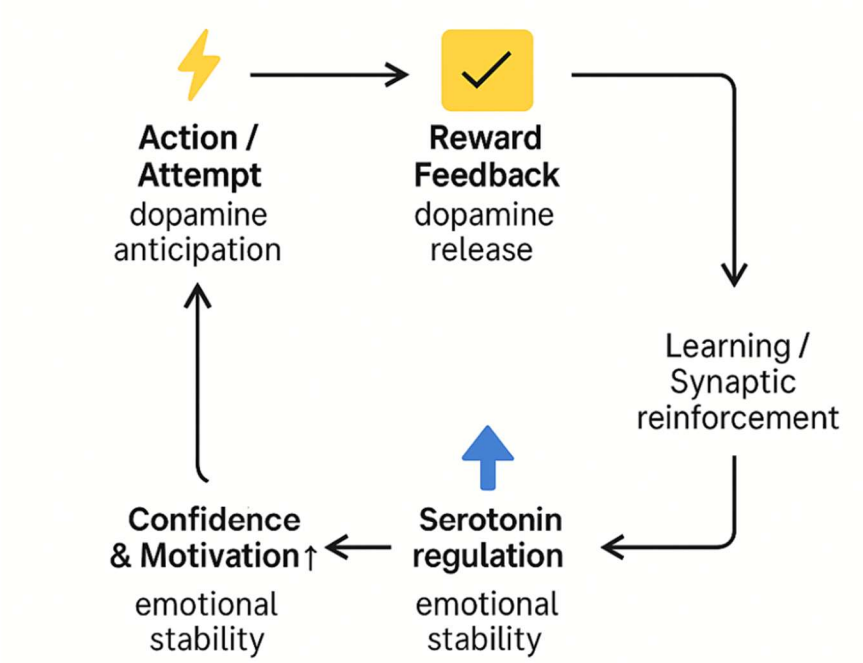


Diagram 3 Conceptual model of motivational reinforcement. Dopaminergic reward supports learning and engagement, while serotonin contributes to emotional stability and ling-term consolidation.

But something else plays a key role: serotonin. Serotonin stabilizes emotion, regulates mood, and increases satisfaction. It protects the dopaminergic system by:

→ preventing overstimulation,

→ supporting emotional stability,

→ helping to learn consolidate in the long term.

These neurotransmitter systems interact dynamically and do not operate in isolation; their balance is shaped by context, deveolpment, and individual experience.

In families, schools, and community settings, every encouragement, every positive feedback, every small success literally shapes the child's brain by strengthening the neural networks behind competence and confidence.

Hypothalamo-Pituitary-Adrenal Axis

This motivational loop only works when the environment is safe enough. **When children are exposed to chronic, unpredictable, or threatening stress, another system takes over: the HPA Axis.** This system releases cortisol. Cortisol is not bad by itself — in short periods, it helps us react and survive. But when stress becomes repetitive or uncontrollable, cortisol becomes harmful:

- → it slows down neuronal growth,
- → it interferes with myelin formation,
- → it disrupts both white and gray matter development,
- → and it destabilizes serotonin pathways, making emotional regulation harder.

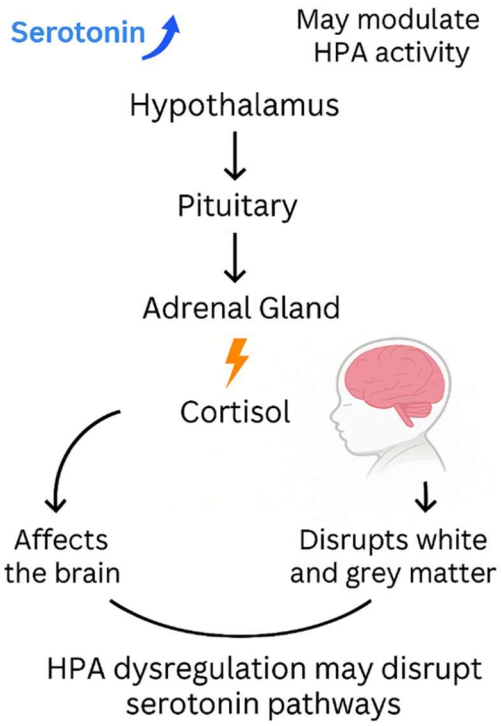


Diagram 4 Activation of the hypothalamo-pituitary-adrenal axis under stress. Chronic cortisol exposure disrupts emotional regulation, learning capacity and neural

Chronic stress does not only affect behavior, but it is also associated with measurable structural and functional changes in the developing brain. That's why emotional safety, predictability, and supportive relationships are major neuroprotective factors.

Practice Insight – When motivation Fails

When motivation collapses, it is not always resistance.

Youth workers should consider:

- *Is the environment safe enough for learning?*
- *Is the stress level higher than the adolescent's regulation capacity?*
- *Are efforts recognized before results?*

Dopaminergic learning loops are significantly impaired under chronic threat

White and Grey matter

How environment shapes white matter - Myelination process

Myelin is the insulation around neural pathways — it makes communication faster, smoother, and more efficient.
Modern neuroimaging clearly shows that:

- → Children growing up in enriched, supportive, stimulating environments develop thicker and better-organized myelin. **Learning, repetition, and practice strengthen myelination over time (Zhang et al., 2025).**
- → In contrast, chronic stress, poverty[1], instability disrupt the maturation of oligodendrocytes — the cells that produce myelin – leading **to slower and less coordinated communication between brain regions (Teicher et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2025).**

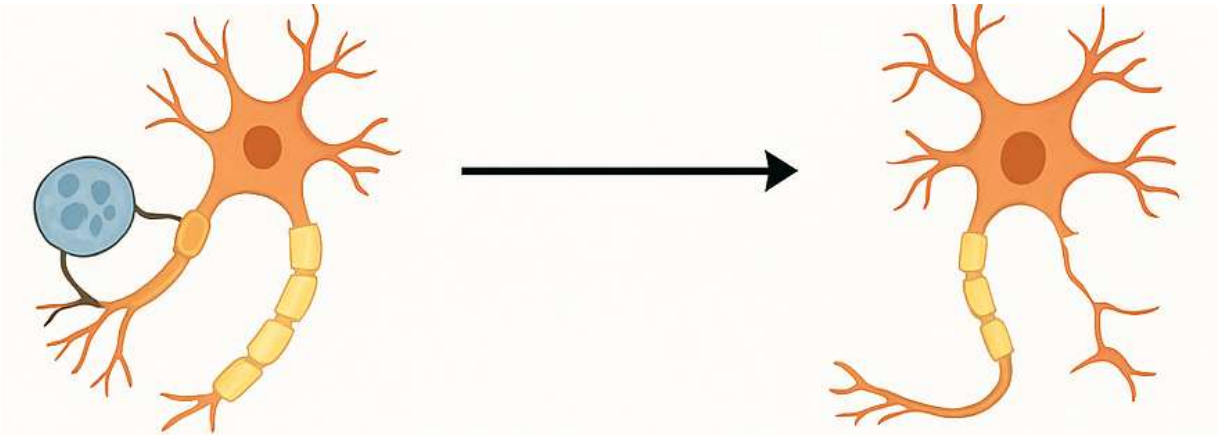


Diagram 5 Environmental influences on myelination. Supportive experiences strengthen neural communication, while chronic stress slows and disrupts signal transmission.

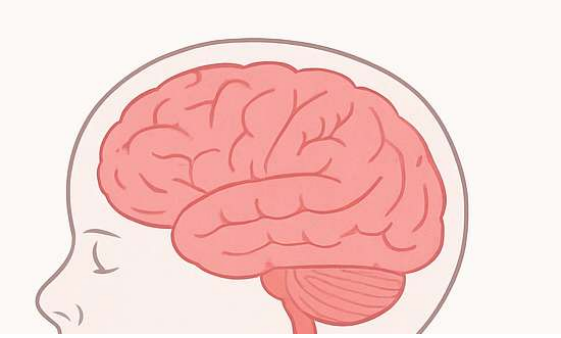
A supportive environment speeds up the brain — a stressful environment slows it down. **Experience determines how fast and how well the brain communicates.**

How environment shapes gray matter?

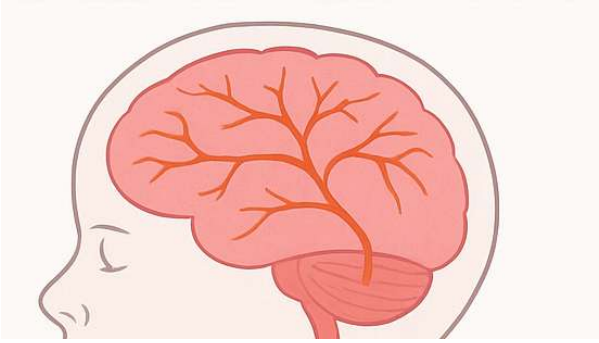
Gray matter is where reasoning, emotional processing, and executive control happen. During middle childhood, two essential processes occur simultaneously:

- → strengthening meaningful connections,
- → gradually removing unnecessary ones — known as synaptic pruning.

[1] Lower socioeconomic environment is linked with reduce white-matter integrity in children (Noble et al., 2015)



A child raised in a **rich emotional and cognitive environment** tends to show **stronger dendritic growth, thicker and more stable cortical regions,** especially in prefrontal areas related to decision-making and self-regulation (Noble et al., 2015).



A child exposed to **adversity or chronic stress** may show **faster-than-expected cortical thinning, loss of useful connections, and reduced efficiency in high-level processing** (Casey et al., 2025).

🎯 **White and gray matter are never separate systems. White matter gives speed AND gray matter gives meaning. Both develop together — and the environment sets the trajectory.**

Adolescent Brain (12-18 years)

From Efficiency to Large-Scale Reorganization

Until now, we talked about how the brain becomes more efficient - Through pruning myelination, and learning-driven specialization. But adolescence marks a turning point. The brain doesn't just continue to improve : it reorganizes. This reorganization affects emotions, motivation, decision-making, stress, and social behavior - all at once.

A period of multimodal reorganization

There is intense synaptic pruning in prefrontal and associative areas. The brain is basically cleaning up connections that are not efficient anymore to make the system faster and more specialized. **Juraska (2024), describe how strong this pruning is during adolescence.**

At the same time, white-matter growth increases. **This improves the speed of communication between regions, but it also creates windows of vulnerability, because these networks are not fully stabilized yet (Juraska & Willing, 2017).**



Diagram 6 Major phases of synaptic growth and pruning across development. Adolescence represents a second large-scale reorganization, increasing efficiency while creating vulnerability to stress.

On top of that, hormones come in and strongly activate limbic, emotional circuits before the prefrontal cortex is fully mature**. So, emotions get loud and fast, while reasoning and control are still catching up (Casey et al., 2025)**.

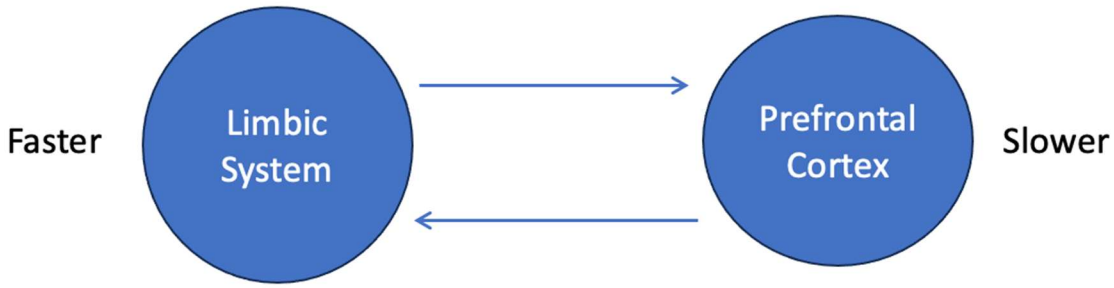
Adolescence is not chaos – it is a brain under pressure, reorganizing itself to become more efficient.

The timing mismatch – why adolescents take risks

During adolescence, there is dopamine peaks. This makes novelty, intensity, and risk highly rewarding. **Baker, Glaván & Fuligni (2025) show how strong this reward sensitivity becomes. This sensitivity is shaped by the environment — for example, family connectedness helps stabilize reward circuits (Morris et al., 2018).**

Adolescents are extremely sensitive to social evaluation and peer presence. **Sherman et al. (2016) show that just knowing friends are watching is enough to activate the reward system.** So socially, the brain is more reactive, more reward-oriented.

There is a timing gap between brain systems. The limbic system — the emotional and reward part — is fast, reactive, and highly active. The prefrontal cortex, which manages reasoning and control, develops more slowly. **Konrad et al. (2013) describe this gap very well.**



This creates a natural imbalance: emotion and reward lead, reasoning follows later. **It's not that adolescents don't know the risks — it's that their brain processes the reward value faster than the control mechanisms can regulate it. "Feel first, think later" is developmental — not defiant.**

Practice Insight – Risk Is Not Irrational

During adolescence, **risk-taking is not a lack of knowledge or intelligence**. It reflects a developmental timing mismatch. **Emotional and reward systems are highly active, while control and inhibition systems are still maturing.**
Adolescents often **feel the reward before they can evaluate the risk**. This is a developmental process – not defiance.
In practice, this means:

- Risk increases in peer contexts and emotionally charged situations,
- Reasoning alone is often ineffective in the moment,
- Adult presence and structure matter more than explanations.

Guidance works better than control.
Co-regulation works better than confrontation.

Digital Overstimulation – The impact

The digital environment interacts with the adolescent brain — a brain that is already highly sensitive to reward, novelty, and social feedback.

Constant notifications can hijack the reward–attention loop. Research shows that stimuli associated with reward can automatically capture attention. **In digital environments, repeated notifications may function as learned reward cues, transiently enhancing attention while promoting habitual checking (Failing & Theeuwes, 2018; Trach et al., 2025).**

Overstimulation shortens attention span and increases fatigue and impulsivity. **Yilmaz & Özkan (2025) highlight how continuous digital engagement overloads cognitive resources, making it harder for adolescents to sustain focus.**

Internet or problematic digital use can increase attention problems and anxiety, with strong **associations documented between high levels of screen time and emotional instability in adolescence** (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Yilmaz & Özkan, 2025).

And emerging research suggests that chronic digital overload may accelerate the "brain-age gap" — meaning some adolescents' brains appear older than expected under prolonged stress and overstimulation.

The adolescent brain was not designed for endless stimulation, especially not at the intensity and speed of today's digital environment.

These findings describe population-level trends and do not imply uniform effects across all adolescents.

Relational stress as a neurobiological disruptor

This type of stress that is often underestimated but it is extremely powerful for the adolescent brain: relational stress, especially peer stress and bullying. **Bullying activates chronic threat circuits in the brain — mainly the amygdala and the insula. The Journal of Adolescent Health (2024) shows that repeated exposure keeps the brain in a constant 'survival mode', which reduces prefrontal engagement. So reasoning, planning, and impulse control drop.**

Social exclusion activates the same neural pain pathways as physical pain (Eisenberger, 2015). **For adolescents, being ignored or excluded is not 'just emotional' — it is processed as real pain in the brain. Victimization changes white-matter integrity** in circuits responsible for emotion regulation. Frontiers in Human Neuroscience (2025) shows that chronic peer stress literally reshapes the architecture of the brain. And with cyberbullying, the impact intensifies. **Emerging evidence suggests that cybervictimization may intensify stress-reward interactions, contributing to heightened anxiety and impulsivity.**

Relational stress is not superficial. It is a neurobiological disruptor. This is why protective factors matter so much: peer belonging, safe adults, predictable routines, and cultural identity. These elements act as buffers that support emotional regulation and reduce the biological impact of stress. **Social safety is a biological need — not a luxury.**

How living conditions become Neurobiological Stress

Environmental and socioeconomic conditions influence the architecture of the adolescent brain. This goes beyond individual behavior — it's structural, it's biological, and it is measurable. Chronic socioeconomic stress affects white-matter maturation. **Findings published in PNAS (Proceedings of the National Academy of Science of the United States of America) in 2024 show that long-term financial and environmental instability slows down or disrupts the development of the brain's communication pathways.**

Neighborhood adversity changes brain structure and connectivity. **Suarez et al. (2023), demonstrate that adolescents raised in unsafe or disadvantaged**

neighborhoods show altered connectivity in networks involved in attention, emotion, and regulation.

Early life stress reshapes circuits responsible for emotion regulation. **Tottenham & Galván (2016) shows that early adversity changes the amygdala–prefrontal pathways, lowering the brain's capacity to manage emotional intensity later in adolescence.**

Research by Kirsch et al. (2025) highlights how early life stress increases vulnerability to substance use and problematic behaviors. A brain shaped by chronic stress becomes more reactive, more reward-driven, and less regulated — which increases risk-taking. **Research shows that socioeconomic inequality can leave biological traces, including measurable effects on the brain architecture, connectivity, and stress regulation.**

How belonging protects the adolescent brain

Research from Frontiers (2023) shows that feeling connected to one's culture strengthens emotion regulation. Belonging gives young people a sense of identity, continuity, and safety. Rituals, rhythm, and storytelling function as neuroprotective cultural buffers. In other words, culture provides built-in tools for self-soothing and co-regulation.

When we bring this into our Caribbean reality, we clearly see how culture becomes a protective force in everyday life. Our musical traditions — the rhythms, the drums, the chants passed down by our ancestors — are not only artistic expressions. **They are regulatory tools**. Many young people who grow up in difficult environments still find a form of refuge in these rhythms. For some adolescents in emotional distress or facing social adversity, music becomes a place of exile, a moment where the nervous system can finally breathe.

These cultural practices engage the body, the breath, the group, and the emotional memory. **They activate co-regulation, grounding, and a sense of belonging — even when everything else feels unstable. This is why, in Caribbean contexts, culture is not just heritage. It is a neuroprotective resource** that continues to support our adolescents today, just as it supported our communities for generations.

Once we understand **the protective role of culture and belonging, the next step is to look at how we translate this knowledge into action — especially when we face dysregulated or disruptive behaviors.** And in Caribbean families, Donald et al. (2024) show that multigenerational resilience is linked to higher self-esteem among both youth and adults. This means resilience isn't only individual — it is transmitted, shared, and reinforced across generations. **Culture heals what context harms.** Belonging doesn't just make adolescents feel safer — it shapes how their brain handles stress.

Culture as a Neuroprotective Resource – Beyond the Caribbean Context

The Caribbean examples illustrate how culture can support emotional regulation – but **every cultural context carries its own regulatory resources.**
Culture is not limited to tradition or heritage.
It includes:

- Shared rituals and routines.
- Music, rhythm, movement, or storytelling.
- Collective identity and belonging.
- Values transmitted through family and community life.

In practice, youth workers are invited to ask:

→ *What helps young people feel grounded and connected in this context?*

→ *What shared practices create rhythm, predictability, or meaning?*

→ *Where do adolescents already find co-regulation (even informally)?*

Culture does not have to be invented. It must be recognized, supported, and valued.

From Understanding to Action

How neuroscience informs everyday youth work practices

The purpose of this section is to translate neuroscientific knowledge into **practical, ethical, and relational responses** when working with adolescents. Youth workers are **not therapists.** Their role is **not to treat trauma or diagnose difficulties**, but to create **conditions where regulation, safety, and learning become possible**. Neuroscience does not provide ready-made solutions. It offers a **framework for**

understanding what is happening beneath behavior, and for adjusting adult responses accordingly.

The first principle is that behavior communicates unmet needs. A dysregulated behavior doesn't come from nowhere. It reflects a moment where the stress load is higher than the regulatory capacity. Instead of judging the behavior, we read the function behind it. A simple shift in questioning changes everything. Instead of asking 'Why did you do this?' — which activates defensiveness —we ask: 'What function does this serve?' or 'What is the unmet need right now?'. These questions open a door instead of closing it.

Second, we use co-regulation. Our tone, our breathing, our posture, and even the rhythm of how we speak all play a role. These elements stabilize the limbic system and help the adolescent regain prefrontal access. Before we talk about choices or consequences, we must bring the nervous system back into regulation.

Third, we rely on predictability, rhythm, and relational safety. Nature Reviews Psychology (2024) emphasizes that these factors literally help reorganize neural circuits. Predictability reduces threat; rhythm supports regulation; and relational safety rebuilds trust. **Safety and connection bring the brain back into regulation. Without safety, there is no learning. Without connection, there is no self-control.**

Neuroscience-Based De-escalation Strategy

(Crisis / Anger / Emotional Overload)

This three-step framework supports de-escalation while respecting the youth worker's role and limits.

1. **Safety – Calm the Nervous System First**

   When threat circuits (amygdala, insula) are active, reasoning is unavailable.

In practice:

- Reduce sensory load (lower voice, slow movements, increase physical space).
- Remove audience or reduce stimulation when possible.
- Regulate your own breathing – co-regulation begins with the adult.
- Offer predictable cues: *"I'm here. You are safe. We'll go step by step".*

2. **Connection – Engage the Social Brain**

Connection reduces limbic activation and supports emotional stabilization

In practice:

- Use attunement: calm tone, grounded posture, slow pace.
- Validate emotion without validating behavior: *"I see you're overwhelmed. Let's breathe together".*
- Avoid questions beginning with *"Why".*
- Offer presence, not pressure.

3. **Regulation – Help the Body Release Stress**

Regulation must occur **in the body before the brain can think clearly**.

In practice:

- Use body-first tools:
  - Paced breathing
  - Rhythmic tapping
  - Walking slowly
  - Grounding (5-4-3-2-1)
- Introduce short, structured routines: *"Two breaths, one step back, one minute of silence"*.
- Only when calmer => propose problem solving.

Body tools for Regulation and De-escalation

When young people are in a state of heightened emotional arousal, cognitive strategies alone are often ineffective.

Body-based tools allow direct access to the autonomic nervous system, helping to reduce physiological activation and restore a sense of safety.

These tools are particularly relevant for young people exposed to:

→ chronic stress,

→ trauma,

→ impulsivity,

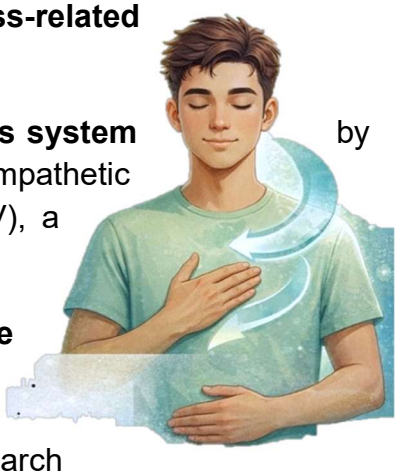
→ emotional overload.

No single tool works for everyone. Regulation strategies must always be adapted to the young person's comfort, culture and context.

Paced Breathing

Paced breathing refers to intentionally slowing and regulating the breathing rhythm to influence the automatic nervous system. Unlike spontaneous "calming down", paced breathing involves guiding the breath at a specific tempo, often with a longer exhalation, to reduce physiological arousal.

This tool is particularly useful when young people experience intense emotional activation, impulsivity, or stress-related dysregulation.



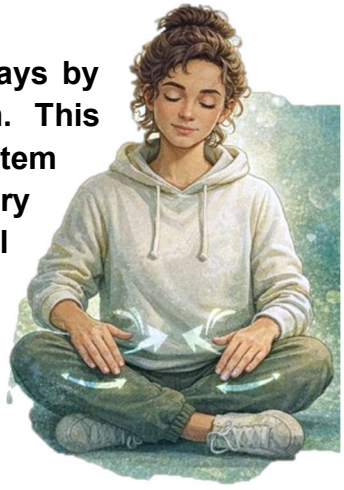
Paced breathing directly **targets the autonomic nervous system** by increasing parasympathetic (vagal) activity, reducing sympathetic overactivation, and improving heart rate variability (HRV), a key marker of emotional regulation.

Slow and rhythmic breathing helps decrease amygdala-driven responses and supports the re-engagement of cortical control, making de-escalation and relational intervention possible. Research has consistently shown that paced breathing reduces anxiety and physiological stress markers, enhances emotional regulation, improves attention and impulse control.

Paced breathing does not require emotional insight or verbal processing. It is an accessible, non-invasive tool that supports regulation even when cognitive capacities are temporarily compromised.

Rhythmic tapping

This tool is particularly useful when young people experience heightened emotional activation, agitation, or stress-related dysregulation. **Rhythmic tapping involves the use of slow, alternating bilateral movements to provide structured sensory input, supporting nervous system regulation during moments of emotional escalation.**



Rhythmic tapping directly engages sensorimotor pathways by introducing predictable, rhythmic bilateral stimulation. This form of sensory input helps reduce limbic system hyperactivation and supports the integration of sensory and motor processes, thereby promoting emotional stabilization. By anchoring attention in the body and in rhythm, rhythmic tapping contributes to the reduction of physiological arousal and emotional intensity.

Bilateral rhythmic stimulation has **been widely used in trauma-informed and body-based approaches, where it has**

been shown to support emotional regulation, reduce anxiety, and enhance a sense of safety. The alternation between left and right sides of the body is thought to facilitate neural integration and support the re-engagement of cortical control mechanisms when emotional overload limits cognitive access.

Rhythmic tapping is particularly accessible, as it does not require verbal processing, emotional insight, or complex instructions. It can be implemented discreetly, in seated or standing positions, and adapted to the young person's comfort level. When guided at a slow and steady pace, rhythmic tapping offers a non-invasive and effective strategy to support regulation and prepare the ground for subsequent relational or cognitive interventions.

Walking slowly

This tool is particularly useful when young people experience heightened emotional activation, agitation, or motor restlessness.

Walking slowly involves intentional, regulated movement designed to reduce physiological arousal and support nervous system regulation through bodily awareness.



Slow and deliberate walking directly engages the vestibular and proprioceptive systems, which play a central role in emotional regulation and spatial orientation.

By reducing the speed of movement and focusing attention on bodily sensations, this tool helps counteract impulsive motor activation and supports a return to a more regulated physiological state.

Regulated movement has been shown to facilitate the downregulation of sympathetic nervous system activity while promoting the re-engagement of cortical control mechanisms

Grounding (5-4-3-2-1 sensory technique)

This tool is particularly useful when young people experience intense emotional activation, dissociation, or stress-related dysregulation. Grounding **techniques aim to reconnect the individual to the present moment by mobilizing sensory and bodily awareness, thereby reducing emotional overload.**

Grounding directly supports nervous system regulation by shifting attention away from internal distress toward immediate sensory input. **This process helps reduce amygdala-driven responses and facilitates the re-engagement of cortical networks involved in attention, orientation, and self-regulation.**

The 5–4–3–2–1 sensory sequence provides a structured and accessible framework to support this process. By identifying five things that can be seen, four that can be heard, three that can be touched, two that can be smelled, and one that can be tasted, young people are guided toward progressive sensory anchoring. This sequential activation of the senses promotes present-moment awareness and supports physiological stabilization.



Pressing the feet firmly into the ground further enhances grounding through proprioceptive input, reinforcing bodily orientation and a sense of physical stability. **Research and clinical practice have shown that grounding techniques can effectively reduce emotional flooding, anxiety, and dissociative responses, particularly in trauma-exposed populations.**

Grounding does not require emotional insight or verbal processing. It is a simple, non-invasive, and adaptable tool that can be implemented even when cognitive capacities are temporarily compromised, making it particularly relevant in moments of acute emotional escalation.

Point of vigilance – Perspective for Youth Workers

These tools are **not techniques to control behavior**. They are ways to **support regulation, restore safety and rebuild connection.**

They can also be **culturally adapted** – integrate into collective practices, rituals, music, movement or shared rhythms already meaningful to young people.

When youth workers understand the brain, they do not excuse behavior – they respond more accurately, more safely and more humanely.

Acting without Reacting

Once regulation is restored, youth workers are often faced with a key question: What should I do now? Understanding what happens beneath behavior is essential, but it is not sufficient. Professionals also need support to decide how to respond, when to intervene, and what to postpone, while maintaining safety, structure, and relationship.

The following tools are designed to support functional reading of behavior and informed decision-making, without replacing therapeutic or clinical intervention. They aim to help youth workers act thoughtfully rather than reactively, especially in emotionally charged situations.

Functional reading of Behavior

A simplified functional analysis for youth workers

This tool helps youth workers understand the immediate function of a behavior, in order to adapt their educational and relational response. It is not a clinical assessment and does not aim to explain personal history or diagnose difficulties.
It supports a shift from the question: “Why did this happen?” to “What does this behavior serve in this moment?”

Simplified Functional Analysis Grid

Element	Guiding questions
Situation	What happened just before? (context, place, people, triggering event)
Observable behavior	What does the adolescent do concretely? (facts only, no interpretation)
Probable nervous system state	Hyperactivation / inhibition / overload / dissociation
Possible function of the behavior	To protect? Avoid? Obtain a response? Self-regulate? Be seen or recognized?
Unmet needs	Safety? Recognition? Clear limits? Pause? Relational support?
Adjusted adult response	Regulation? Calm presence? Protective distance? Containing structure?

Key principles:

→ Behavior is an adaptive response to an internal state or environmental context.

→ Dysregulated behavior often indicates that stress load exceeds regulatory capacity.

→ Understanding the function of behavior allows youth workers to adjust their response without excusing or minimizing the act.

Point of vigilance – Perspective for Youth Workers

This tool is not designed to be used during a crisis. In moments of emotional overload, the priority is always safety and regulation, not analysis. The tool presented here is intended to be used:

- before challenging situations, to anticipate and adjust youth worker posture,
- after a crisis, to reflect and refine future responses,
- or outside moments of tension, during team discussions or supervision.

Their purpose is not to produce documentation, but to help the youth worker adjust their responses and build more effective relational strategies over time.

It can be culturally adapted and integrated into existing collective practices, rituals, routines, music, movement, or shared rhythms that already carry meaning for young people.

Decision-Making according to the state of regulation

This is a decision guide, not an analytical grid. It does not require completion and is not meant to be filled in. Its purpose is to provide immediate orientation for adult responses, based on the adolescent's observable state of regulation.
In moments of tension, this guide functions as a mental shortcut:
"If the adolescent is in this state, this is the adult response that is most likely to support regulation and safety." This tool supports youth workers in choosing what to do, what to delay, and what to avoid, depending on the adolescent's current state of regulation.
Core principle: *Educational decisions are relevant only after a minimal level of regulation has been reached. Before that, the priority is safety and nervous system stabilization.*

Key reminder:

→ Regulation always precedes education.

→ Safety always precedes sanction.

→ Relationship makes decision possible.

Decision-Making Guide table

Observed state	Priority response	To avoid
Hyperactivation (shouting, agitation, impulsivity, opposition)	Secure the situation, reduce stimulation, co-regulate, maintain calm presence.	Reasoning, immediate sanctions, confrontation, debate.
Inhibition / withdrawal (silence, freezing, avoidance)	Quiet presence, time, respect of rhythm, gentle grounding.	Forcing speech, pressure, interpretation.
Partial return to calm	Name what happened, validate emotion, postpone decision, contain the frame	Immediate consequences or moralizing
Regulation stabilized	Shared reflection, repair, educational consequence, clear framework	Minimizing or avoiding structure

Conclusion – Supporting regulation, restoring meaning

Understanding the developing brain does not mean excusing behavior, predicting trajectories, or removing responsibility. It means recognizing that **behavior is always shaped by context, experience, and relational safety.** Throughout this guide, neuroscience has been used as a **lens**, not as a verdict. Not to label young people, but to help **youth workers** adjust their posture, timing, and responses.

Point of vigilance for Youth Workers – Ethical framework

This tool:

- do not replace therapeutic care or clinical intervention,
- are not techniques to control behavior,
- support an educational, relational, and safety-based posture.

It can be culturally adapted and integrated into existing collective practices, rituals, routines, music, movement, or shared rhythms that already carry meaning for young people.

This guide does not replace professional judgment. It helps prevent inappropriate decision made under stress, and supports youth workers maintain structure, safety, and relationship — even in complex or emotionally intense situations.

Adolescents are not unfinished adults. They are individuals navigating a period of intense neurological reorganization, heightened sensitivity to stress and reward, and growing need for belonging and meaning. **For youth workers, the challenge is not to control behavior, but to create the conditions in which regulation, learning, and responsibility become possible.**

This guide does not offer recipes. **It offers reference points:** to slow down youth worker reactions, to prioritize safety and regulation, to distinguish moments for action from moments for reflection, and to support decision-making that remains educational, relational, and ethical.

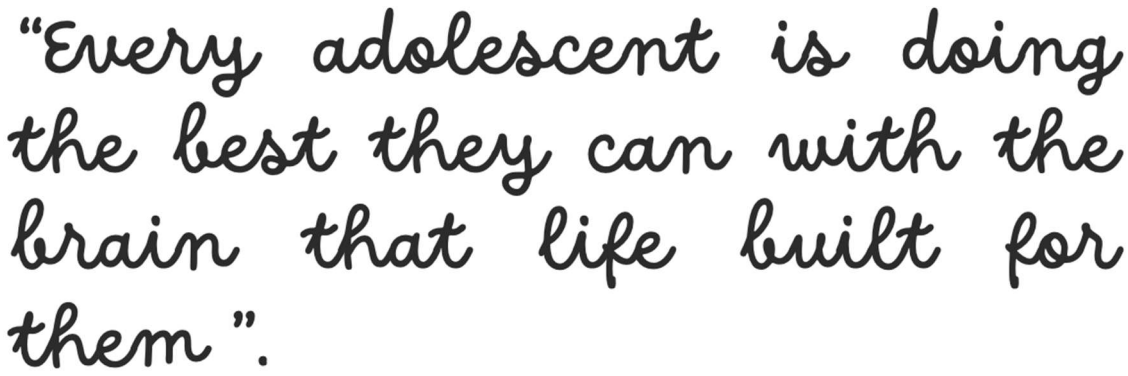
When youth workers understand what happens beneath behavior, they do not lower expectations — they raise the quality of their responses.

Regulation precedes education.

Safety precedes sanction.

Relationship makes decision possible.

Ultimately, this guide invites youth workers to remember that their presence, consistency, and capacity to regulate themselves are among the most powerful tools they have.



The brain never grows alone — and neither does regulation.

1. **Neuroscience-Based De-escalation — Practical Sheet**

Neuroscience-Based De-escalation Strategy (Crisis / Anger / Emotional Overload)

1. Safety – Calm the Nervous System First

- Reduce sensory load (lower voice, slow movements, more distance).
- Remove audience / reduce stimuli.
- Regulate your own breathing → co-regulation begins with you.
- Offer predictable cues: "I'm here. You're safe. We'll go step by step."

🧠 **Threat circuits (amygdala, insula) dominate → no access to reasoning.**

2. Connection – Engage the Social Brain

- Use attunement: mirror calm tone, grounded posture.
- Validate emotion without validating behavior : *"I see you're overwhelmed. Let's breathe together."*
- ❌ Avoid questions beginning with "Why".
- Offer presence, not pressure.

🧠 **Connection reduces limbic activation and restores prefrontal access.**

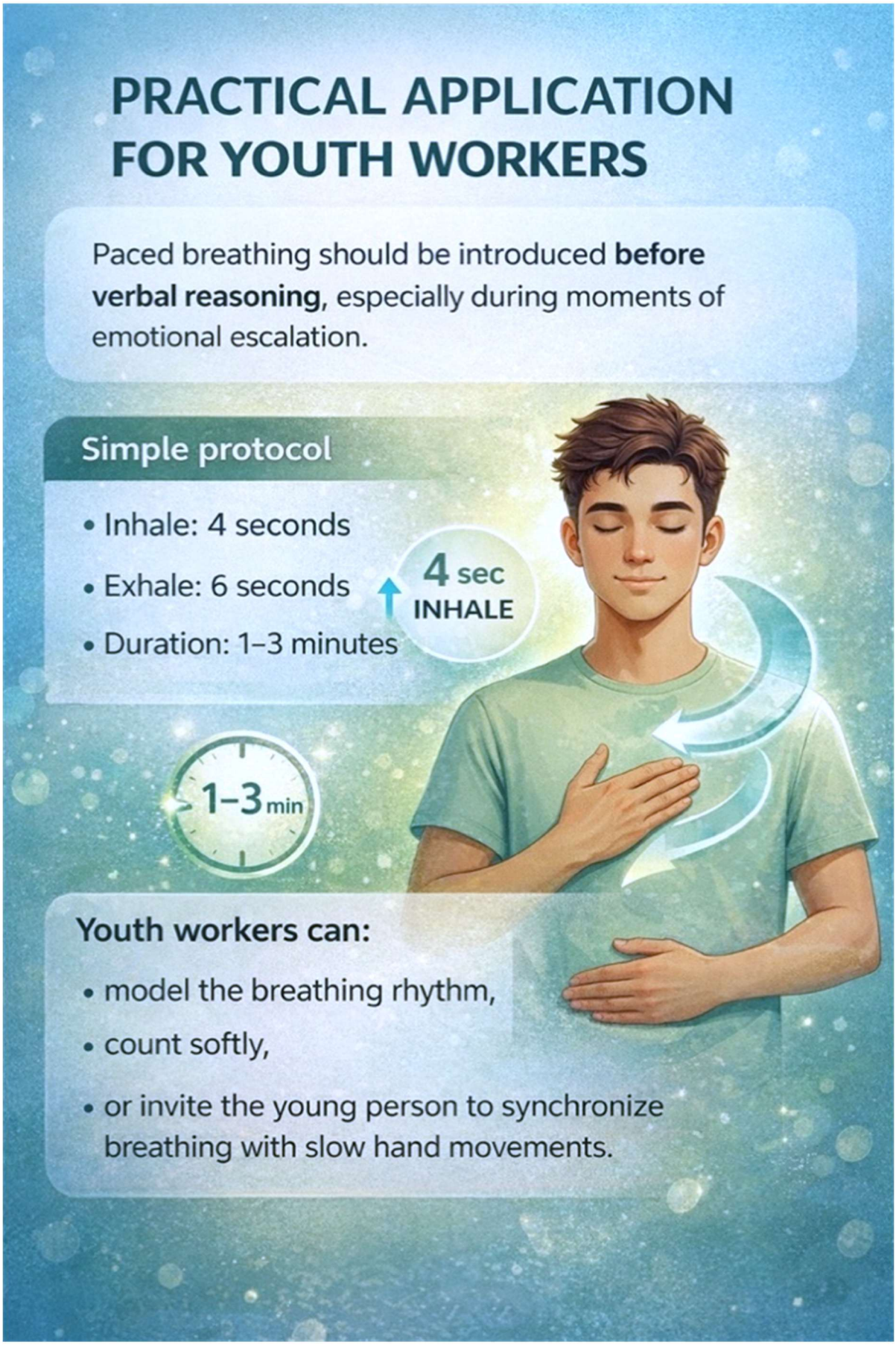
3. Regulation – Help the Body Release Stress

- Use body-first tools:
  - 🧰 paced breathing
  - 🧰 rhythmic tapping
  - 🧰 walking slowly
  - 🧰 grounding (5–4–3–2–1)
- Introduce short structured routines :"Two breaths, one step back, one minute silence."
- Only when calmer → propose problem solving.

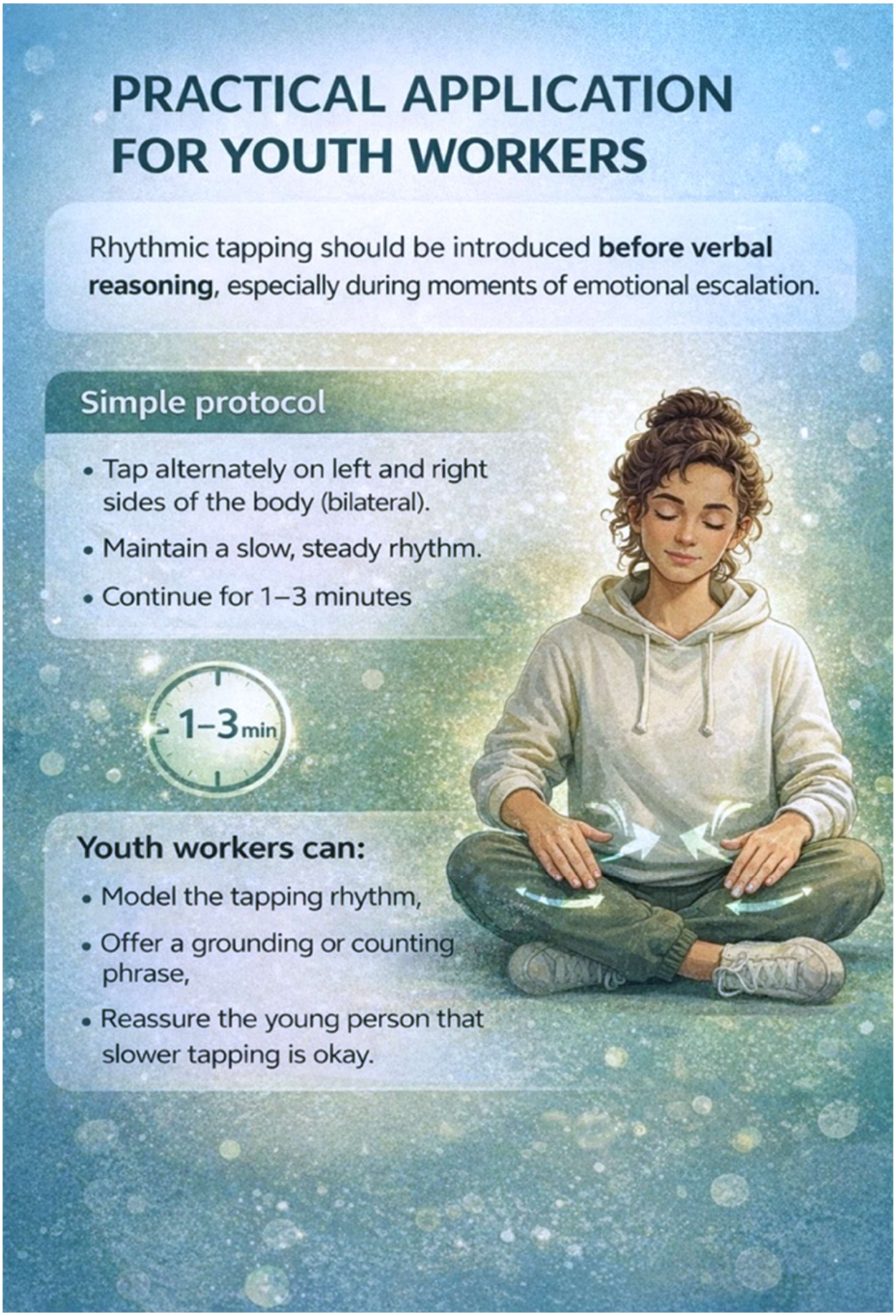
🧠 **Regulation must happen in the body before the brain can think clearly.**

Key takeaway : In crisis, the brain needs safety before guidance.

2. **Paced breathing**



3. **Rhythmic tapping**



4. **Walking slowly**

PRACTICAL APPLICATION FOR YOUTH WORKERS

Walking slowly should be introduced **before verbal reasoning**, especially during moments of emotional escalation.

Simple protocol

- Walk at a slow pace
- Focus attention on foot-to-ground contact.
- Continue for 2–5 minutes.

2–5 min



Youth workers can:

- Model slow walking with the young person.
- Encourage deep, even breaths.
- Point out the feel of each step, in the present moment.

5. **Grounding**

PRACTICAL APPLICATION FOR YOUTH WORKERS

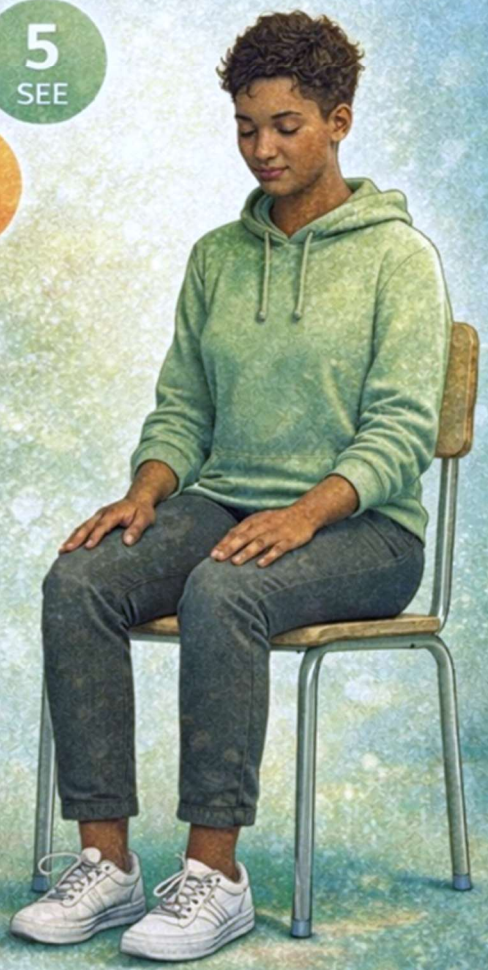
Grounding should be introduced **before verbal reasoning,** especially during moments of emotional escalation.

Simple protocol

- Practice the 5-4-3-2-1 sensory exercise.
- Press feet firmly into the ground.
- Continue for 2–5 minutes.

5 SEE
4 HEAR
3 TOUCH
2 SMELL
1 TASTE

2–5 min



Youth workers can:

- Guide the 5-4-3-2-1 sequence.
- Encourage contact with a physical object.
- Invite the young person to voice what they notice.

6. Simplified Functional Analysis – Work Grid

Situation *What happened just before? (context, place, people, triggering event)*	**Observable behavior** *What does the adolescent do concretely? (facts only, no interpretation)*
Probable nervous system state Hyperactivation Inhibition Overload Dissociation	**Possible function of the behavior** To protect Avoid Self-regulate Be seen or recognized Get an answer
Unmet needs Recognition Clear limits Relational support Break	**Adjusted adult response** *Regulation? Calm presence? Protective distance? Containing structure?*

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CHAPTER3 THE RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PROCESS AND PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE INTERVENTIONS

Core elements of an effective restorative justice process

When it comes to the key building blocks that make up the restorative justice process, research and manuals highlight these recurring elements:

1. Voluntary participation & informed consent.
2. Careful preparation of victim, offender and supporters.
3. Trained, neutral facilitators who manage safety and power imbalances.
4. Facilitated face-to-face or mediated dialogue (victim's voice central).
5. Concrete reparative agreements and follow-up/accountability.
6. Confidentiality, proportionality and safety screening.

Voluntary participation and informed consent

Voluntariness is foundational to restorative justice. Participation must be genuinely voluntary for all parties, particularly victims, and based on informed consent—meaning participants understand the purpose, process, possible outcomes, and their right to withdraw at any time. Coerced or pressured participation undermines both ethical integrity and effectiveness, often leading to defensive or performative engagement rather than genuine accountability.

In its Handbook on Restorative Justice Programmes the UN Office on Drugs and Crime states: "Restorative justice processes should be voluntary, and consent should be based on full information about the process and its possible outcomes."

From a desistance and GLM perspective, voluntariness is also what enables agency: people are more likely to engage meaningfully and sustain change when they choose to participate rather than comply under threat.

Careful preparation of victims, offenders, and supporters

Effective restorative justice requires thorough pre-process preparation. This involves individual meetings with victims, offenders, and any supporters to explore expectations, assess readiness, clarify boundaries, and ensure emotional and physical safety. Preparation helps participants articulate their needs, reduces the risk of re-traumatization, and prevents the encounter from becoming adversarial or chaotic.

Shapland et al. emphasize: "Preparation is critical to the success of restorative justice; without it, conferences risk causing harm rather than repair."(https://www.sccjr.ac.uk/publications/restorative-justice-in-practice/).

Preparation is also where facilitators assess whether restorative justice is appropriate at all (see the next section *"When not to use restorative justice alone"*).

Trained, neutral facilitators who manage safety and power imbalances

Restorative justice is not simply a conversation; it is a skilled, facilitated process. Trained facilitators are essential for managing emotional intensity, addressing power imbalances (e.g. gender, age, status, or prior abuse), and maintaining a focus on harm, accountability, and repair. Facilitators must be neutral regarding outcomes while remaining actively responsible for safety and process integrity.

The European Forum for Restorative Justice notes that restorative justice "requires well-trained facilitators capable of managing complex dynamics and ensuring fairness and safety for all participants." (EFRJ, https://www.euforumrj.org/en/standards-restorative-justice).

Poor facilitation is one of the most common causes of failure of and harm stemming from restorative justice practice, particularly in cases involving vulnerability or coercive control.

Facilitated dialogue with the victim's voice at the centre

A defining feature of restorative justice is dialogue, whether face-to-face or mediated indirectly (e.g. shuttle dialogue or written exchanges). The victim's experience of harm is central, though not exclusive, and the process prioritizes allowing victims to express impact, ask questions, and be heard respectfully.

H. Strang and L. Sherman (2007) highlight: "Victims value restorative justice because it gives them a voice and allows them to communicate the personal consequences of crime." (https://www.iirp.edu/images/pdf/RJ_full_report.pdf).

Dialogue is not about reconciliation or forgiveness; rather, it is about recognition, understanding, and accountability, which research shows are key to victim satisfaction and offender insight.

Concrete reparative agreements and follow-up accountability

Effective restorative justice processes result in clear, concrete, and achievable agreements that address harm and support reintegration. These may include apologies, restitution, community service, treatment, education, or other reparative actions. Crucially, agreements must be realistic and accompanied by mechanisms for follow-up and accountability.

As the UNODC emphasizes in their much quoted above Handbook on Restorative Justice Programmes: "Agreements should be specific, proportional, and monitored to ensure completion and fairness."

From a GLM and desistance perspective, well-designed agreements link accountability to life goals, increasing both compliance and long-term impact.

Confidentiality, proportionality, and safety screening

Restorative justice requires clear boundaries around confidentiality, except where disclosure is required for safeguarding or legal reasons. Proportionality ensures that the process and outcomes are appropriate to the seriousness of the harm and the capacities of participants. Rigorous safety screening is essential, particularly in cases involving domestic abuse, sexual violence, or significant power asymmetries.

The Council of Europe guidelines explicitly state: “Restorative justice services must ensure confidentiality, proportionality, and safeguards to prevent secondary victimization.” (https://www.coe.int/en/web/cdpc/restorative-justice).

Failure to apply these principles risks undermining trust in restorative justice and exposing participants to further harm.

Why these elements matter

Together, these six elements distinguish effective restorative justice from:

- informal conflict resolution,
- coerced diversionary schemes, or
- poorly implemented “restorative justice”-branded practices.

Practical red flags – when restorative justice should not be used alone

Restorative justice is not appropriate in all cases, and responsible practice requires clear recognition of situations in which a restorative justice intervention may cause harm or be ineffective if used in isolation. Best-practice frameworks consistently stress that safety, consent, and capacity must take precedence over process fidelity or policy enthusiasm.

Ongoing threats to victim safety

Restorative justice should not be used as a standalone response where there is an ongoing or credible risk to victim safety, particularly in cases involving domestic abuse, stalking, coercive control, or repeated intimidation. In such contexts, dialogue may expose victims to further harm, pressure, or retaliation, even when formal safeguards are in place.

The Council of Europe is explicit about this particular risk: “Restorative justice should not proceed where it may endanger the safety of victims or where risks cannot be adequately managed.” (https://www.coe.int/en/web/cdpc/restorative-justice).

In these cases, restorative justice — if used at all — must be embedded within robust protective measures, and sometimes deferred indefinitely.

Severe power imbalances that cannot be safely managed

Restorative justice relies on the possibility of relatively balanced participation. Severe power imbalances—such as those arising from age differences, dependency relationships, institutional authority, or patterns of abuse—can distort dialogue and undermine voluntariness.
In a review of relevant practices and studies, the International Centre for Criminal Law Reform (ICCLR) warns that "where power imbalances are extreme or structural, restorative processes may reinforce rather than repair harm." (https://icclr.org/publications/restorative-justice-a-review-of-practice-and-research/).
Skilled facilitation can mitigate some imbalances, but not all. Where imbalance cannot be managed, proceeding risks legitimizing coercion rather than accountability.

Lack of capacity for informed consent

Restorative justice requires that all participants have the capacity to give informed, voluntary consent. This excludes situations involving:

- Active severe mental illness
- Acute intoxication
- Significant cognitive impairment
- Extreme emotional dysregulation or dysfunction at the time of referral

The UNODC's Handbook stresses: "Participation must be based on the free and informed consent of all parties, and should not proceed if participants lack the capacity to consent."
In such cases, therapeutic or clinical interventions must take priority before any restorative process is considered.

When the victim explicitly does not want contact

A victim's refusal to participate—particularly refusal of contact with the offender—must be respected. Pressuring victims to engage undermines both ethical standards and empirical evidence, which shows that choice and control are central to victim well-being.
Strang et al. (2007) found:
"Victim satisfaction in restorative justice is closely linked to voluntariness and the ability to decline participation."
Restorative justice can sometimes proceed in indirect or symbolic forms (e.g. letters, community reparations), but only if these are genuinely acceptable to the victim.

Treating restorative justice as a "soft option" for serious risk

Another red flag is the use of restorative justice as a substitute for appropriate supervision, treatment, or risk management, particularly in serious or repeat

offending. Restorative justice is not, and should not be framed as, a lenient alternative to accountability.
The Council of Europe cautions: “Restorative justice should complement, not replace, measures necessary to address serious risk or harm.” (https://www.coe.int/en/web/cdpc/restorative-justice).
Using restorative justice alone in high-risk cases risks discrediting the practice and placing unrealistic expectations on victims and communities.

Legal safeguards and procedural protections

Best-practice guidance consistently stresses that:

- Participation in RJ should not be treated as an admission of guilt in court
- Statements made during RJ should generally be inadmissible, subject to safeguarding exceptions
- Confidentiality boundaries must be clearly explained in advance

The ICCLR notes: “Restorative justice processes must be protected from misuse within adversarial legal systems.” (https://icclr.org/publications/restorative-justice-a-review-of-practice-and-research/).
Without these safeguards, restorative justice risks becoming coercive or strategically manipulated.

Conclusion – when and when not

Restorative justice is not a universal remedy. Ethical and effective practice requires knowing when not to use restorative justice alone, and when it should be:

- deferred,
- adapted,
- or integrated into a wider framework of protection, supervision, and support.

Seen this way, careful exclusion criteria should not be seen as an inherent weakness of restorative justice, but a sign of professional maturity and legitimacy.

Typical restorative justice case flow

Restorative justice is not a single conversation — it is a structured, safeguarded process with clear stages, each of which matters.
Typically the restorative justice process is conducted in the form of the following case flow:

1. Referral & screening for safety/fit.
2. Preparation / pre-conference meetings (victim & offender separately).
3. Facilitated restorative meeting (dialogue + co-created reparative plan).
4. Agreement implementation & follow-up monitoring.
5. Closure / evaluation of outcomes.

Skipping or skimping on any of these steps poses a risk of compromising the process and jeopardizes the outcome, or safety of those involved.



Fig. 2 – The Restorative Justice Case Flow

Referral and screening for safety and fit

The restorative justice process begins with referral, followed immediately by screening for appropriateness. This stage assesses safety risks, voluntariness, capacity to consent, power imbalances, and whether restorative justice is suitable at this time. Screening also considers whether RJ should proceed alone or alongside other safeguarding, therapeutic, or supervisory measures.

The Council of Europe emphasizes the importance of tis step: “A careful assessment should be made to determine whether restorative justice is appropriate and safe for the parties involved.” (https://www.coe.int/en/web/cdpc/restorative-justice).

For youth workers, this stage is critical: saying no or not yet is a sign of good practice, not failure.

Preparation / pre-conference meetings

NB! Victim and offender *have* to be met separately.

Preparation involves separate, confidential meetings with the victim and the young person responsible for the harm, and often their supporters. These meetings explore expectations, clarify the process, assess emotional readiness, and help participants articulate what they want to say and need from the process. Preparation reduces

anxiety, prevents re-traumatization, and lays the groundwork for meaningful dialogue.
Research consistently shows preparation is essential. In their qualitative study Shapland et al. note: “Effective preparation is one of the strongest predictors of positive restorative justice outcomes.” (https://www.sccjr.ac.uk/publications/restorative-justice-in-practice/).
For youth workers, preparation is also where trust is built and where unrealistic expectations are gently corrected.

Facilitated restorative meeting

The restorative meeting — whether face-to-face or mediated — is the core encounter. A trained facilitator supports structured dialogue in which the victim’s experience of harm is central, the young person takes responsibility, and all participants discuss how the harm can be repaired. The outcome is a co-created reparative plan, rather than a sanction imposed from outside.
Strang and Sherman (2007) highlight: “Restorative justice conferences give victims voice and allow offenders to understand the real human impact of their actions.”
For young people, this is often the moment when abstract rules become relationally meaningful.

Agreement implementation and follow-up monitoring

Restorative justice does not end with the meeting. Agreements must be implemented, supported, and monitored. This may involve apologies, restitution, community service, education, counselling, or other reparative actions. Follow-up ensures accountability while also providing encouragement and practical support.
In its Handbook the UNODC stresses: “Restorative agreements should be monitored to ensure fairness, feasibility, and completion.” (UNODC, https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Handbook_on_Restorative_Justice_Programmes.pdf).
For youth workers, this phase often overlaps with ongoing mentoring or support work and is crucial for translating intention into change.

Closure and evaluation of outcomes

The final stage involves formal closure of the process and reflection on outcomes. This may include confirming completion of agreements, offering participants a chance to reflect on the experience, and evaluating impacts such as victim satisfaction, learning, or behavioural change. Closure reinforces accountability while marking a clear endpoint.
Evaluation also supports learning and service improvement. As the European Forum for Restorative Justice notes, “evaluation is essential to ensure quality, credibility,

and continuous improvement in restorative justice practice." (EFRJ, https://www.euforumrj.org/en/resources/publications).
For young people in particular, clear closure helps avoid lingering stigma and supports reintegration.
This step is also important as an instrument to building knowledge base that is of great value for impact studies and reviews.

Next steps for the youth workers' team: embedding restorative justice well

For youth workers, restorative justice is not a standalone intervention but a relational practice that must be trained for, carefully introduced, and embedded in real-world supports. When done well, it strengthens accountability and capacity — when done poorly, it risks harm.

Train facilitators in safety and power-balancing (don't improvise)

Effective restorative justice depends heavily on skilled facilitation. Research and practice manuals consistently warn that restorative justice is not simply "bringing people together to talk," but a structured process that requires facilitators to actively manage emotional safety, power imbalances, and procedural fairness. This is especially important in youth cases, where age, authority, trauma histories, or gendered and cultural dynamics can distort dialogue if left unmanaged.
The Australian Law Reform Commission and restorative justice guidance hosted on AustLII (https://www.austlii.edu.au) stress that facilitators must be trained to:

- assess readiness and risk,
- prevent coercion or re-victimisation,
- manage strong emotions safely,
- intervene when dialogue becomes harmful or unequal.

As Daly notes, "poorly conducted restorative justice conferences can reproduce the very injustices they are meant to address" (Daly, 2002). Improvised or under-trained practice risks turning RJ into either a shaming ritual or an informal punishment, undermining legitimacy and outcomes.

Start with low-risk, willing cases (youth diversion, minor offences) and evaluate

Best practice recommends that organisations phase in restorative justice, beginning with cases that are:

- low risk,
- voluntary on all sides,
- developmentally appropriate,
- embedded in diversion or early-intervention frameworks.

Youth diversion contexts are particularly well suited to restorative justice because they allow accountability without formal criminalisation, which research shows can entrench offending identities. Evaluations from the RMIT Centre for Innovative Justice emphasise that starting small allows teams to:

- build facilitator competence,
- develop referral and screening protocols,
- gather outcome data,
- earn trust from courts, police, and communities.

The RMIT Centre notes that restorative justice programs are most effective when organisations "learn by doing — but with structure, supervision, and evaluation built in from the outset." (https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/schools-colleges/college-of-design-and-social-context/research/centre-for-innovative-justice)

Link restorative justice to reintegration supports to make agreements workable

Restorative justice agreements are most successful when they are realistic, supported, and connected to broader reintegration services. Research consistently shows that agreements focusing only on symbolic gestures (apologies, letters) are less effective than those that also address structural barriers such as education disruption, unemployment, mental health needs, or substance use.

Linking restorative justice to reintegration supports aligns with:

- desistance theory (supporting agency and future goals),
- the Good Lives Model (helping people secure primary goods pro-socially),
- and trauma-informed practice (addressing underlying needs).

The Restorative Justice Council (UK) emphasises that restorative justice should not operate in isolation but as part of a coordinated support ecology, where youth workers help translate agreements into concrete steps and connect young people to services that make follow-through possible.

As their guidance puts it, "restorative justice works best when it is embedded within wider systems of care, support and supervision." (RJ Council, https://restorativejustice.org.uk).

TYPES OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PRACTICES

1. Victim–Offender Mediation (VOM)

Victim–Offender Mediation (VOM) is one of the oldest and most widely used restorative justice practices internationally, forming the backbone of many contemporary RJ programs. It has been implemented across youth justice, criminal courts, schools, and community settings, and is supported by a substantial evidence base.

What it is

Victim–Offender Mediation is a structured, facilitated dialogue between a person who has been harmed by an offence and the person responsible for that harm. The process is typically one-to-one, though supporters may be involved where appropriate, and is guided by a trained, neutral mediator. Participation is strictly voluntary for both parties, and the process prioritises safety, informed consent, and respect.

The core aim is not to determine guilt or impose punishment, but to create a space in which harm can be acknowledged, questions answered, and responsibility taken in a meaningful, relational way.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime defines victim–offender mediation as "a process that allows victims and offenders to meet in a safe and structured setting to discuss the offence and its consequences, with the assistance of a trained facilitator." (https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Handbook_on_Restorative_Justice_Programmes.pdf).

How it works

VOM follows a carefully sequenced process, rather than a single meeting.

First, the mediator conducts separate preparation meetings with the victim and the offender. These meetings explore expectations, assess readiness, ensure voluntariness, and help each participant articulate what they want to say and need from the process. Preparation is widely recognised as critical to avoiding re-traumatisation and ensuring a constructive dialogue.

If both parties wish to proceed, a face-to-face meeting (or, where necessary, a mediated or shuttle format) is arranged. During the encounter, the victim is supported to describe the impact of the offence, while the offender is encouraged to listen, respond, and take responsibility. The discussion then moves toward identifying what is needed to repair the harm.

The process concludes with an agreement on concrete reparative actions, which may include an apology, financial restitution, community service, or symbolic forms of reparation. Agreements are ideally realistic, proportionate, and followed up.

As the already mentioned qualitative research paper by Shapland et al. notes: "Victim–offender mediation is most effective when preparation is thorough and agreements are meaningful and monitored." (https://www.sccjr.ac.uk/publications/restorative-justice-in-practice/).

What it offers to victims

For victims, VOM provides something that formal justice processes often do not: voice and validation. Victims are able to tell their story in their own words, ask

questions that only the offender can answer, and receive direct acknowledgment of the harm they have suffered.
Studies consistently show that victims who participate in VOM report:

- greater satisfaction with the justice process,
- reduced fear and anger,
- a stronger sense of closure and emotional resolution.

H. Strang's landmark research (2007) found that many victims value "being heard and taken seriously" more than punishment itself: "Victims want answers, acknowledgment, and reassurance — needs that restorative justice is uniquely positioned to meet."

What it offers to offenders

For offenders — particularly young people — VOM creates an opportunity to move beyond abstract rule-breaking and confront the human impact of their actions. Hearing directly from the person harmed can prompt empathy, reflection, and moral learning in ways that formal sanctions rarely achieve.
VOM allows offenders to:

- take responsibility in a meaningful way,
- understand harm at a personal level,
- make amends rather than passively receive punishment,
- experience accountability without stigmatization.

When facilitated well, the process can reduce shame by separating the harmful act from the person — a dynamic consistent with Braithwaite's concept of reintegrative shaming: "Restorative processes condemn the act while maintaining respect for the offender as a person."

What it offers the community

From a community perspective, VOM offers a more meaningful resolution than formal justice alone. It promotes accountability that is visible and relational, rather than hidden behind institutional processes. By supporting repair and reintegration, it can reduce the likelihood of further harm and strengthen community trust.
Meta-analyses suggest that VOM can contribute to lower reoffending rates, particularly for young people and property-related offences, while also improving victim outcomes (Sherman & Strang, 2007).

Why it is particularly useful for youth

Victim–offender mediation is especially well suited to work with young people. Adolescents are developmentally responsive to direct, relational feedback, and many report that meeting the victim is a turning point in how they understand their behaviour.

Rather than reinforcing a fixed “offender” identity, VOM allows young people to:

- see themselves as capable of repair,
- reconnect with pro-social values,
- experience accountability without exclusion.

As the Restorative Justice Council (UK) notes: “Young people often engage more deeply when they can see the real human consequences of their actions and are supported to put things right.” (https://restorativejustice.org.uk/resources).

2. Family Group Conferencing / Community Group Conferencing

Family Group Conferencing (FGC), sometimes referred to as Community Group Conferencing, is a restorative justice practice that broadens the restorative encounter beyond the victim and offender to include, most importantly members of the offenders’ families, supporters, and community members. The model is most famously associated with youth justice in New Zealand, where it was developed in the late 1980s drawing on Maori whanau traditions that emphasise collective responsibility, dialogue, and repair.

FGC has since been widely adopted in youth justice systems across Europe, Australia, and North America, particularly in cases involving young people whose behaviour is closely shaped by family and social contexts.

As the New Zealand Ministry of Justice describes it: “Family group conferencing recognises that offending by children and young people is often best addressed by involving their family, victims, and community in decision-making.” (NZ MoJ, https://www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector-policy/key-initiatives/restorative-justice/).

What it is

Family Group Conferencing is a structured restorative meeting involving the person harmed, the young person responsible for the harm, their families or caregivers, and sometimes teachers, youth workers, or other community supporters. The process is guided by a trained facilitator who ensures safety, fairness, and meaningful participation.

Unlike victim–offender mediation, which focuses primarily on a dyadic (two-sided) encounter, conferencing reflects the understanding that youth offending is relational and embedded within family and community systems. Responsibility and repair are therefore shared, rather than placed solely on the young person.

How it works

The conferencing process unfolds in several stages. After careful screening and preparation, participants come together in a facilitated meeting where everyone is

invited to speak. Victims describe the impact of the harm, families express concern and expectations, and the young person is supported to take responsibility.
The group then collectively maps:

- the harm caused,
- the needs arising from that harm,
- and the factors that contributed to the offence.

From this shared understanding, participants develop a group-created reparative plan, which may include apologies, restitution, education commitments, counselling, community service, or family-based supports. Importantly, responsibility for follow-up is collective: families and community members commit to supporting the young person to complete the agreement.
Research by Maxwell and Morris highlights this feature as central to effectiveness: "Family group conferences shift responsibility from the state to families and communities, increasing both accountability and support."
(https://www.corrections.govt.nz/resources/research/family_group_conferencing_and_reoffending)

What it offers victims

For victims, conferencing provides a supportive and validating environment. Rather than facing the offender alone, victims are accompanied by others who witness the harm, affirm its seriousness, and share responsibility for ensuring it is addressed.
Victims often report that conferencing:

- reduces feelings of isolation,
- provides reassurance that the behaviour is taken seriously,
- results in clearer, more practical plans to prevent recurrence.

Studies show high levels of victim satisfaction, particularly where victims feel listened to and see families taking responsibility alongside the young person (Sherman & Strang, 2007).

What it offers offenders

For young people, Family Group Conferencing combines accountability with support. The presence of family members can heighten responsibility — young people often report that disappointing parents or caregivers is more powerful than formal punishment — while also reducing stigma and shame.
Family involvement helps:

- contextualise behaviour without excusing it,
- reinforce expectations for change,
- mobilise practical supports for reintegration.

Plans typically include concrete steps such as returning to school, completing chores, attending counselling, paying restitution, or contributing to community

projects. This aligns closely with desistance and Good Lives Model principles, which stress agency, social capital, and practical goal-setting.

What it offers the community

At a community level, conferencing reinforces shared values and collective responsibility. It makes justice visible, relational, and locally grounded, rather than distant and bureaucratic. By strengthening natural support networks around the young person, it reduces reliance on formal sanctions and contributes to longer-term prevention.

The Council of Europe notes that conferencing can "strengthen community confidence in justice responses by involving citizens directly in problem-solving and reintegration." (https://www.coe.int/en/web/cdpc/restorative-justice).

Why it is particularly suitable for young people

Family Group Conferencing is especially effective with youth because it reflects the reality that young people's lives are interdependent. Adolescents are heavily influenced by family dynamics, peer relationships, and community norms. Conferencing works with — rather than against — these influences.

By engaging the people who matter most in a young person's life, the process:

- increases compliance with agreements,
- supports identity change,
- and reduces the risk of further harm.

Daly notes: "Conferencing works not because it is lenient, but because it activates relationships that matter." (https://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0024/74316/daly_conferencing.pdf)

3. Restorative Circles (Sentencing Circles / Peacemaking Circles)

Restorative Circles — including sentencing circles and peacemaking circles — are restorative justice practices inspired by Indigenous and the so called "First Nations" traditions, particularly in Canada and the United States. These practices draw on long-standing cultural methods of conflict resolution that emphasise collective dialogue, respect, and shared responsibility, rather than adversarial decision-making. While restorative circles have been adapted for use in contemporary justice systems, many practitioners stress the importance of recognising their Indigenous origins and avoiding superficial or extractive use of these traditions.

As the National Association of Community and Restorative Justice (NACRJ) notes: "Circle processes are rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing and should be practised with cultural humility and respect." (https://www.nacrj.org/circle-processes).

What they are

Restorative circles are highly participatory, structured dialogue processes that bring together the person harmed, the person responsible, their supporters, elders or other well respected community members, and other stakeholders. Participants sit in a circle, symbolising equality and interconnectedness, and the process is guided by shared values such as respect, honesty, accountability, and care.

Unlike mediation or conferencing, circles intentionally de-centre professional authority and place decision-making power in the collective. A trained circle keeper facilitates the process, holding the structure while allowing the group's wisdom to shape outcomes.

How they work

A defining feature of restorative circles is the use of a talking piece — a physical object passed from person to person, granting the right to speak and the responsibility to listen. This practice slows the conversation, reduces interruption, and creates psychological safety.

Through multiple rounds of dialogue, participants:

- share their experiences and perspectives,
- build a collective understanding of the harm,
- explore values, responsibilities, and future hopes.

The process typically concludes with a group-developed plan addressing reparation, reintegration, and ongoing support. Because decisions emerge from collective consensus, agreements often carry strong moral authority and high levels of commitment.

Pranis describes circles as: "A process that builds a shared understanding and collective commitment through respectful listening and dialogue." (https://livingjusticepress.org/product/the-little-book-of-circle-processes/).

What they offer victims

For victims, restorative circles provide a deeply supportive and affirming environment. The presence of community members and elders can help validate the harm and situate it within shared moral and cultural values, rather than isolating the victim in a private dispute.

Victims often report that circles:

- feel less adversarial and more respectful,
- offer reassurance through collective acknowledgment,
- foster a sense of belonging and communal care.

This collective validation can be particularly powerful in cases where harm has disrupted trust across a wider social network.

What they offer offenders

For offenders, circles offer a less confrontational and less stigmatizing format than traditional justice processes. Responsibility is still central, but it is framed within narratives of belonging, identity, and shared values.

Rather than being positioned solely as "offenders," participants are invited to reflect on:

- who they are in relation to their community,
- the values they aspire to live by,
- the kind of future they wish to build.

This approach aligns closely with desistance theory and Indigenous justice principles, which emphasise identity transformation through reconnection rather than exclusion.

Pranis notes that "circles do not ask, 'What rule was broken?' but 'What values do we want to live by?'" (https://livingjusticepress.org/product/peacemaking-circles-from-crime-to-community/).

What they offer the community

Restorative circles are widely participatory and can involve a broad cross-section of the community. This makes them particularly well suited to addressing long-standing conflicts, repeated harms, or issues affecting community cohesion.

By engaging community members directly, circles:

- strengthen social bonds,
- reinforce shared norms,
- build local capacity for conflict resolution.

In some Indigenous and rural contexts, circles have been used successfully to address chronic disputes, family conflict, and intergenerational harm.

Why this matters for young people

Restorative circles can be especially effective for young people from collectivist cultures or marginalised backgrounds, who may experience mainstream justice systems as alienating or culturally disconnected. Circles offer a space where identity, culture, and belonging are explicitly recognised as part of the justice response.

For youth, circles can:

- support positive identity formation,
- reconnect them with community values,
- reduce shame while reinforcing accountability.

As one evaluation of Indigenous justice initiatives observed, ÿoung people respond strongly to processes that affirm belonging and cultural identity while holding them accountable." (https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/csj-sjc/just/ijr-jri.html).

4. Reparative Workshops and Community Panels

Reparative workshops and community panels — sometimes called reparative boards or community justice panels — are restorative justice practices that place local citizens at the centre of accountability and repair. These models are used in several jurisdictions, most notably in Vermont (USA), as well as in parts of the UK and Belgium, often as part of diversion or probation-linked responses for young people.

Unlike victim-offender mediation or circles, panels do not always require direct victim participation. Instead, trained community members act as representatives of the wider social harm, ensuring that accountability is meaningful while remaining accessible to cases where victims prefer indirect involvement.

The Vermont Department of Corrections describes reparative boards as "a community-based response that holds offenders accountable while engaging citizens in repairing the harm caused by crime." (https://doc.vermont.gov/corrections-community-justice).

What they are

Reparative panels consist of a small group of trained volunteers or community representatives who meet with the young person responsible for an offence. Victims may participate directly, but more commonly provide input through written statements or are represented by the panel.

Panels operate at the intersection of restorative justice and civic participation, combining relational dialogue with clear structure, expectations, and oversight. This makes them particularly attractive in systems seeking restorative alternatives that still provide consistency and procedural clarity.

How they work

After referral and screening, the panel meets with the young person in a structured setting. The discussion explores:

- what happened,
- who was affected and how,
- what the young person understands about the impact of their actions,
- and what needs to be done to repair the harm.

Together, the panel and the young person negotiate a reparative plan, which may include restitution, community service, apology letters, skills-building workshops, or participation in education or employment programs. Importantly, panels typically

monitor follow-up, meeting again with the young person to review progress and completion.
Research on Vermont's reparative boards highlights this ongoing accountability as a key strength: "The follow-up process reinforces responsibility while providing encouragement and guidance." (https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/232506.pdf).

What they offer victims

For victims, reparative panels offer a way to have their harm acknowledged and addressed without requiring face-to-face contact. Victims can submit written statements outlining the impact of the offence and their expectations for repair.
Victims often value that:

- the community takes their experience seriously,
- reparation is concrete and monitored,
- the process avoids retraumatisation while still promoting offender accountability.

Evaluations suggest that many victims appreciate knowing that local citizens are actively involved in ensuring meaningful consequences (Karp & Clear, 2000).

What they offer offenders

For young people, panels provide accountability that is firm but supportive. Hearing directly from respected community members can be powerful, particularly for youth who may be disengaged from authority figures.
Panels often:

- humanise community norms,
- balance challenge with encouragement,
- frame accountability as a pathway to reintegration rather than exclusion.

Because reparative plans frequently include skills-building, mentoring, or service, panels also support practical reintegration and align very well with the desistance theories and the Good Lives Model principles.
As Karp notes: "Community justice boards hold offenders accountable while actively assisting their reintegration." (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0011128799045002004).

What they offer the community

At the community level, reparative panels democratise justice. They empower residents to participate directly in responding to harm, strengthening collective capacity and confidence.
Community benefits include:

- increased trust in justice processes,

- stronger local norms against harm,
- enhanced skills in conflict resolution and mentoring.

In this sense, panels function not only as justice mechanisms but also as civic institutions, reinforcing social cohesion and shared responsibility.

Why they are particularly interesting for young people

For young people, reparative panels offer a balance of structure, guidance, and relational accountability. The presence of multiple adult community members can provide mentoring and modelling, while the formalised process offers clarity and predictability.

Panels are especially well suited for youth who:

- benefit from clear expectations,
- need opportunities to build skills and confidence,
- may not be ready for direct victim dialogue but still require meaningful accountability.

As one evaluation concludes, “reparative boards provide young offenders with both accountability and a sense of belonging to the civic community.”(https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/232506.pdf)

5. “Material” Reparation Projects (Repairing Property, Community Work, Skill-Based Service)

Material reparation projects are among the most concrete and immediately comprehensible restorative justice practices, particularly for young people. Rather than focusing primarily on dialogue, these approaches centre on directly repairing the tangible harm caused by an offence — whether that harm is damaged property, defaced public spaces, or disruption to community life.

Such projects are often embedded within broader restorative processes (mediation, conferencing, or panels) and translate agreed accountability into visible, hands-on action. They are widely used in youth diversion schemes across Europe, Australia, and North America.

The Restorative Justice Council (UK) notes that “practical reparation can be a powerful way for people who have offended to demonstrate responsibility and commitment to repair.” (https://restorativejustice.org.uk/resources/what-restorative-justice)

What they are

Material reparation projects involve young people personally repairing or compensating for the physical or material consequences of their actions. This can include:

- repairing damaged property,

- repainting graffiti,
- cleaning vandalised spaces,
- gardening or environmental restoration,
- skill-based volunteering linked to the harm caused.

Unlike generic community service, these projects are explicitly connected to the offence and framed as acts of repair rather than punishment. The emphasis is on restoring what was harmed and contributing positively to the community.

How they work

Material reparation is typically agreed through a restorative process that clarifies:

- what harm was caused,
- who was affected,
- and what repair would be meaningful and proportionate.

Once agreed, the young person carries out the work, often with supervision or mentoring. Projects may be completed individually or in small groups and can be combined with mediation or conferencing, allowing dialogue and action to reinforce one another.

Because the work is tangible and time-limited, progress and completion are easy to monitor, providing clarity for victims, youth workers, and justice agencies alike.

What they offer victims

For victims, material reparation provides visible and concrete restitution. Seeing damage repaired or spaces restored can help rebuild a sense of fairness and closure, particularly in cases where symbolic gestures alone feel insufficient.

In some cases, victims may choose to observe the work or meet the young person informally (where safe and appropriate), which can further humanise the process and reinforce accountability.

Research suggests that victims often value outcomes where “the harm is repaired in a way that is visible and meaningful.” (https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/238407.pdf).

What they offer offenders

For young people, material reparation transforms accountability into constructive action. Instead of being told abstractly that they have done wrong, they experience the effort required to repair harm.

Key benefits for offenders include:

- immediate feedback and visible impact,
- development of practical skills and work habits,
- reduction of shame through contribution rather than exclusion.

This aligns closely with Braithwaite's concept of reintegrative shaming, where wrongdoing is condemned but the person is reintegrated through positive action rather than stigmatisation.
As Braithwaite argues in "Reintegrative shaming", "shame is most constructive when it is followed by opportunities for reparation and reintegration." (https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/crime-shame-and-reintegration/0A1F8F77A5E6B8F45F8A50D6E94E0C55).

What they offer the community

At the community level, material reparation produces immediate, visible benefits. Public spaces are restored, neighbourhoods improved, and community members see young people contributing rather than being excluded.
These projects help:

- build trust in restorative approaches,
- counter narratives of youth as threats,
- prevent escalation by addressing harm early and constructively.

They also provide opportunities for positive contact between young people and community members, strengthening informal social controls and social cohesion.

Why they are particularly effective for young people

Material reparation works especially well with young people because it creates a clear link between action and consequence. Rather than abstract penalties, young people can see — and feel — the effort required to put things right.
As one youth justice evaluation concludes: "Young people engage more meaningfully when accountability is practical, visible, and directly linked to the harm caused."(YJB, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-justice-board-restorative-justice).
By combining responsibility with skill-building and contribution, material reparation projects support both accountability and reintegration, making them a powerful component of youth-focused restorative justice practice.

6. Community Service *with* a Restorative Framework

Community service delivered within a restorative framework represents a significant shift from traditional, punitive models of unpaid work. Rather than assigning young people a fixed number of "hours to be served," restorative community service emphasises meaningful contribution, relevance to harm, and identity development.
This model is increasingly used in youth justice systems as part of diversion, probation, or restorative agreements, reflecting evidence that how service is designed matters as much as whether it is imposed.

As McNeill and Maruna argue, “punishment alone rarely builds the social bonds and identities needed to support desistance.” (https://www.cep-probation.org/desistance/).

What it is

Restorative community service involves young people undertaking purposeful, socially valuable activities that are connected — directly or symbolically — to:

- the harm caused,
- the needs of the victim,
- or shared community values.

The emphasis is not on “working off” a debt, but on making a positive contribution that signals accountability and reintegration. Service placements are often embedded in real community settings such as sports clubs, care homes, environmental projects, food banks, or local NGOs.

How it works

Tasks are chosen collaboratively, often through a restorative conference, panel, or youth worker-led planning process. Young people are encouraged to reflect on:

- what skills they have or want to develop,
- what kind of contribution would feel meaningful,
- how the service relates to the harm caused.

Many programs include ongoing mentoring or supervision, transforming service into a relational experience rather than a bureaucratic obligation. Where possible, placements may extend beyond the formal justice requirement, allowing young people to continue volunteering or transition into training or employment.
This approach aligns with the Good Lives Model’s focus on securing primary goods such as excellence in work, agency, and community belonging.

What it offers victims

For victims, restorative community service provides indirect but meaningful reparation. Even without direct contact, victims can see that harm has resulted in tangible benefit to the community, reinforcing a sense that justice has been done.
Victims often value knowing that:

- the response was constructive rather than purely punitive,
- the young person is being guided toward positive change,
- the outcome reduces the likelihood of future harm.

As Strang and Sherman note, victims frequently prefer outcomes that are “constructive and preventative rather than merely symbolic” (Sherman & Strang, 2007).

What it offers offenders

For young people, restorative community service can be identity-shaping. Instead of reinforcing an "offender" label, it supports the development of a pro-social self-narrative: I can contribute; I am useful; I belong.

Key benefits include:

- development of soft skills (reliability, communication, teamwork),
- establishment of routine and purpose,
- exposure to positive adult role models,
- pathways into volunteering, education, or employment.

This reflects Maruna's finding that desistance is strongly linked to opportunities for "making good" through socially valued roles. (https://global.oup.com/academic/product/making-good-9781592137814).

What it offers the community

At a community level, restorative service delivers real social value while also reshaping perceptions of young people involved in the justice system. Communities gain useful services and, crucially, see young people in positive, contributory roles rather than as risks to be managed.

This visibility:

- strengthens social cohesion,
- increases public confidence in youth justice responses,
- reinforces norms of accountability paired with inclusion.

Community-based service thus becomes both a justice response and a community development tool.

Why it stands out

What distinguishes restorative community service from punitive models is its transformative intent. When designed restoratively, service is not experienced as humiliation or coercion, but as an opportunity for growth, contribution, and reintegration.

As the Council of Europe's restorative justice guidance emphasises: "Restorative sanctions should promote reintegration and social inclusion, not exclusion or stigma."

For youth workers, this approach offers a powerful way to combine accountability, skill-building, and desistance support — making community service not the end of the process, but a bridge to a different future.

APPENDIX I
RESTORATIVE JUSTICE TYPES – TYPICAL CASE STUDIES

1. Victim–Offender Mediation (VOM)
Case: A 17-year-old broke into a small electronics shop and stole headphones. In mediation, he meets the shop owner, who explains the financial stress and fear caused. The youth apologizes, agrees to pay part of the loss, and helps with inventory for two weekends. Both report reduced tension and closure.

2. Family / Community Group Conferencing
Case: A 16-year-old repeatedly vandalizes a neighbour's fence. At a conference, the victim, the youth, his parents, and a social worker discuss the causes (peer pressure, boredom). Together they agree the youth will repair the fence, attend a sports program, and have weekly check-ins. Relations between families improve.

3. Restorative Circles / Peacemaking Circles
Case: After a school fight involving a 15-year-old, both youths, their families, teachers, and a facilitator sit in a circle. Sharing feelings reveals mutual misunderstandings and pressure from peers. The group agrees on steps: apologies, joint participation in a tutoring project, and monitored conflict-resolution sessions.

4. Reparative Boards / Community Panels
Case: A 19-year-old is caught tagging public buildings. A community panel meets with him to discuss the impact on neighborhood pride and maintenance costs. The plan includes removing graffiti, attending a street art workshop, and creating a mural in an approved space. The panel reports good engagement.

5. Material Reparation Projects (Hands-on Repair)
Case: Two youths (17 and 18) damage benches at a local park. Through a restorative process, they meet park staff and agree to repair the benches, sand and repaint tables, and join a weekend clean-up. The visible contribution shifts community attitudes toward them.

6. Restorative Community Service (Contribution-Based)
Case: A 20-year-old steals a bicycle. The victim prefers not to meet, but supports restorative service. The youth repairs old bikes at a local NGO, donates one to a shelter, and receives mentoring. He later joins the NGO as a volunteer, strengthening his pro-social identity.

CHAPTER 4 DEVELOPMENT OF LIFE & WORK SKILLS IN YOUNG OFFENDERS

4.1. Introduction

Many young people in conflict with the law face complex and overlapping challenges. These include limited access to education, unstable family environments, discrimination, lack of work experience, and low self-esteem. Without targeted and coordinated support, these challenges often lead to social exclusion, unemployment, and an increased risk of reoffending.

Young offenders are not a homogeneous group. However, many share common learning needs that must be acknowledged in youth work practice. These young people often have negative experiences with formal education and authority, which can result in low motivation, limited trust, and resistance to traditional teaching methods.

For this reason, the manual is designed around non-formal education principles promoted by Erasmus+. Learning activities are participatory, flexible, and closely connected to real-life situations. The focus is not on past mistakes, but on present capacities and future opportunities.

Tis manual has been developed as a practical tool for youth workers engaged in non-formal education, mentoring, and coaching processes. It supports the development of key life and work skills that are essential for the successful social and labour-market reintegration of young offenders. Youth workers are encouraged to continuously adapt the activities to the age, cultural background, literacy level, and personal circumstances of participants.

4.2. Role of the Youth Worker in the Coaching Process

In the context of Erasmus+ youth work, the youth worker acts as a facilitator of learning rather than a transmitter of knowledge. When working with young offenders, this role becomes even more important.

The youth worker is expected to:

- Build a relationship based on trust, respect, and consistency
- Encourage reflection and self-awareness
- Support young people in taking responsibility for their choices
- Model positive communication and work-related behaviour

Coaching is understood as a long-term process. Progress may be slow and non-linear, but even small positive changes should be recognised and reinforced.

4.3. Methodological Framework

The methodological approach of this manual is aligned with Erasmus+ priorities in youth participation, inclusion, and employability. It is based on the following principles:

Learning by doing is prioritised over theoretical explanations. Reflection is integrated into every activity to help participants connect experiences with learning outcomes. Real-life scenarios from everyday life and the workplace are used to ensure relevance and transferability of skills.

Group work, peer learning, role-play, and guided discussion are core methods. These methods support social learning, empathy development, and teamwork skills.

A safe and supportive learning environment is a prerequisite for effective youth work with young offenders. Many participants may be hesitant to share opinions or emotions due to fear of judgement or past negative experiences.

Youth workers should co-create basic group rules with participants at the beginning of the process. These typically include respect, confidentiality, active participation, and the right to make mistakes.

Disruptive behaviour should be addressed calmly and consistently, focusing on behaviour rather than personality. The aim is to strengthen accountability without reinforcing stigma.

CORE LIFE/WORK SKILLS

Core life and work skills are the basic abilities that help people manage everyday challenges, make responsible decisions, and function effectively in society and the workplace. These skills go beyond technical knowledge or qualifications and focus on how a person thinks, behaves, communicates, and relates to others. Core life skills include self-awareness, emotional regulation, problem-solving, communication, teamwork, time management, and respect for rules and responsibilities. For many young people, especially those who have experienced instability or conflict, these skills may not have been fully developed, even though they are essential for personal independence and positive social behaviour.

In the context of work, core life skills become work skills. Employers value qualities such as reliability, punctuality, cooperation, adaptability, and the ability to handle feedback or stress. These skills help individuals keep a job, work well with others, and grow professionally over time. Strong core life and work skills support better decision-making, reduce conflict, and increase self-confidence. By developing these

skills, individuals are better prepared to face challenges, build healthy relationships, and create realistic pathways toward education, employment, and long-term social reintegration.

This manual introduces the following key skills and provides practical guidance on how youth workers can support their development.

I. Communication and active listening
II. Problem-solving and critical thinking
III. Conflict resolution and teamwork
IV. Time management and personal organization
V. Understanding values, rights, and responsibilities
VI. Building self-esteem and self-confidence
VII. Setting personal and professional goals

I. Communication and Active Listening

Communication is a foundational competence for social inclusion, employability, and conflict prevention. In youth work with young offenders, communication is often both a challenge and an opportunity. Many participants have developed communication patterns in environments where being heard was difficult, authority was experienced as oppressive, or emotions were expressed through confrontation, silence, or withdrawal. As a result, misunderstandings easily escalate into conflict, and relationships with peers, educators, or employers become fragile.

Communication is a **two-way process** that requires both expression and attentive listening. Youth workers are encouraged to emphasise that communication is not only about what is said, but also about *how* it is said and *how* it is received. Verbal language, tone of voice, facial expressions, posture, and eye contact are explored as equally important elements of communication.

Active listening is presented as a concrete, learnable skill rather than a personality trait. Participants reflect on how often they listen with the intention to understand rather than to respond. The youth worker can gradually introduce the idea that being listened to with respect is a powerful experience that builds trust and reduces tension.

Exercise – Listening Pairs: Participants work in pairs. One participant speaks for two minutes about a recent challenge in daily life, while the other listens without interrupting. The listener then summarises what they heard. This exercise is followed by reflection on how it felt to speak and to listen.

Case Study: A young employee feels disrespected by a supervisor's tone of voice, even though the instructions were clear. Participants analyse what was

communicated verbally and non-verbally and explore alternative ways the situation could have been handled.
Trainer Tip: Some participants may initially resist silence during listening exercises. Reassure them that discomfort is normal and part of learning.

II. Problem-Solving and Critical Thinking

Problem-solving and critical thinking are essential life skills that support personal autonomy, responsible decision-making, and long-term social reintegration. For many young offenders, these skills have not been sufficiently developed due to life experiences shaped by instability, pressure, or environments where quick reactions were necessary for survival. In such contexts, immediate responses—often driven by emotions such as anger, fear, or frustration—were reinforced, while reflection and planning were rarely encouraged or rewarded. As a result, many participants struggle to pause, analyse situations, and consider alternative courses of action before responding.
Through guided discussions and interactive exercises, youth workers should support young people in breaking down everyday challenges into manageable steps. They should learn to clearly define a problem, identify what is within their control, and separate facts from assumptions. Special attention should be given to distinguishing between the problem itself and the emotional reactions attached to it, helping young people understand how emotions can influence judgment and behavior.
Participants are encouraged to generate multiple possible solutions rather than focusing on a single, immediate response. Each option is discussed in terms of short-term and long-term consequences, both positive and negative, for themselves and for others. This process helps participants understand that every choice carries responsibility and that decisions made in the moment can have lasting impacts on their lives, relationships, and future opportunities.
Critical thinking skills are further developed through real-life scenarios drawn from situations participants may encounter in their daily lives, such as conflicts with peers, challenges at school or work, or interactions with authority figures. By analysing these scenarios in a safe and supportive environment, participants practice evaluating risks, questioning automatic thoughts, and considering alternative perspectives. Group work also encourages peer learning, allowing participants to see how different individuals approach the same problem in different ways.
By practising these skills, participants will be better equipped to approach challenges with a calmer mindset, increased self-awareness, and greater confidence in their ability to make constructive decisions. Strengthening problem-solving and critical thinking skills contributes not only to reducing risky or harmful behaviors, but also to empowering young people to take ownership of their actions and actively shape their future paths toward positive reintegration.

Exercise – The Four-Step Problem Tool: Participants identify a personal challenge and work through four steps: defining the problem, generating solutions, considering consequences, and choosing one realistic option.
Case Study: A young person repeatedly misses work due to oversleeping. Participants explore causes beyond blaming, such as routines, stress, or environment, and design practical solutions.
Trainer Tip: Avoid correcting solutions too quickly. The learning process lies in reflection, not perfection.

III. Conflict Resolution and Teamwork

Conflict is a natural part of social interaction and working life. It arises whenever people with different perspectives, needs, or goals come together, and it is not inherently negative. However, many young offenders have learned to associate conflict with punishment, exclusion, or violence, often because their past experiences have shown them that disagreements escalate quickly into harmful outcomes. This module seeks to reframe conflict as a situation that can be managed constructively and even used for personal growth and learning. By shifting the lens through which participants view conflict, the program encourages them to see it not as a threat, but as an opportunity to practice communication, empathy, and problem-solving skills.
In the workplace, the ability to resolve disagreements respectfully can strengthen teamwork, improve productivity, and enhance professional reputation. In personal relationships, it fosters trust and mutual understanding. For young offenders, learning these skills can be transformative, offering them tools to break cycles of aggression and exclusion that may have contributed to their offending behavior. By reframing conflict as a normal and manageable part of life, the program empowers participants to approach disagreements with curiosity rather than fear, and with a mindset geared toward growth rather than punishment.
Participants will explore typical sources of conflict in daily life and the workplace, such as misunderstandings, unmet expectations, or perceived disrespect. These scenarios are presented in relatable ways, allowing young people to recognize how easily small issues can spiral into larger disputes if left unaddressed. Through guided discussions, role-plays, and reflective exercises, they begin to understand that conflict often stems from differences in perception rather than deliberate hostility. This awareness helps them to pause before reacting and to consider alternative explanations for another person's behavior.
Youth workers play a crucial role in this process by emphasizing the difference between reacting emotionally and responding consciously. Emotional reactions—such as anger, defensiveness, or withdrawal—may feel instinctive, but they often intensify the problem. Conscious responses, on the other hand, involve taking a step

back, assessing the situation, and choosing words or actions that de-escalate tension. Participants are encouraged to practice techniques such as active listening, using "I" statements to express feelings without blame, and seeking compromise rather than victory. These skills not only reduce the likelihood of destructive outcomes but also build resilience and confidence in handling future challenges.

Exercises:

- **Role-Play: Misunderstood Instructions** One participant plays a supervisor giving unclear directions, while another plays a worker who feels frustrated. The group discusses how clarifying questions could prevent escalation.
- **Emotional vs. Conscious Response** Participants are given short conflict prompts (e.g., "Someone cuts in line," "A teammate criticizes your work"). They first write down their immediate emotional reaction, then brainstorm a conscious, constructive response.

Case Study/Scenario:

- **Scenario: Perceived Disrespect** A youth imagines being ignored in a group conversation. Instead of lashing out, they practice calmly expressing how they feel and asking for inclusion.
- **Workplace Simulation: Unmet Expectations** In small groups, participants act out a situation where one person expected help with a task but didn't receive it. Together, they explore how to communicate needs clearly and negotiate solutions.

Trainer Tip: Observe group dynamics closely; teamwork exercises often reveal hidden leadership or withdrawal patterns.

IV. Time Management and Personal Organisation

Time management is closely linked to reliability, trust, and responsibility. It is one of the most visible ways people demonstrate respect for others and commitment to their goals. Many young offenders struggle with punctuality not because of a lack of motivation, but because of chaotic routines, limited structure, and sometimes environments where lateness has been normalized. This module supports participants in recognising how the way they use time directly affects opportunities, relationships, and personal reputation. By learning to manage time more effectively, they begin to see how small changes in daily habits can lead to greater stability and trustworthiness in both personal and professional settings.

Youth workers introduce simple organisational tools without overwhelming participants. These include basic planners, phone reminders, and visual schedules that help break down tasks into manageable steps. The emphasis is on practicality: rather than expecting participants to adopt complex systems, the module encourages them to experiment with straightforward strategies that fit their lifestyle.

For example, setting a consistent wake-up time, preparing clothes or materials the night before, or using alarms to signal transitions between activities. These small adjustments can reduce stress and create a sense of control over the day.
The module also explores the social dimension of time management. Being punctual communicates respect for others' time and builds trust in relationships. In the workplace, arriving on time signals reliability and increases chances of being given responsibility. In friendships, keeping to agreed times shows care and consideration. Participants reflect on how lateness can damage trust, close off opportunities, or reinforce negative stereotypes. By reframing punctuality as a skill that strengthens relationships rather than simply a rule to follow, the program motivates young people to take ownership of their routines.

Exercises:

- **Daily Routine Mapping** Participants draw a timeline of their typical day, identifying where time is lost (e.g., oversleeping, distractions). They then brainstorm one small change that could improve structure.
- **Prioritisation Game** Youth workers present a list of tasks (school, chores, social plans). Participants rank them by importance and urgency, learning how to distinguish between what must be done now and what can wait.

Case Study:

- **Group Project Deadline** A team simulation where one member consistently misses deadlines. The group explores how this affects trust and how communication and planning can prevent conflict.
- **Missed Job Interview** A role-play where one participant arrives late to an interview. The group discusses how lateness affects the employer's perception and how better preparation could change the outcome
- A trainee repeatedly arrives late and blames public transport. The group explores responsibility and realistic planning.

Trainer Tip: Celebrate small improvements; punctuality is built step by step.

V. Values, Rights, and Responsibilities in the Workplace

Values, rights, and responsibilities form the foundation of a healthy and fair workplace. Understanding these three elements helps employees behave professionally, protect themselves, and contribute positively to their work environment. For many young people entering the labour market for the first time, especially those with limited or negative previous experiences, learning about workplace values and rights is an important step toward long-term employability and social inclusion.
Workplace values are the principles that guide behaviour and decision-making at work. Common values include respect, honesty, responsibility, fairness, teamwork,

and accountability. Respect means treating colleagues, clients, and supervisors politely, even when there are disagreements. Honesty involves being truthful about work tasks, mistakes, and availability. Responsibility means completing tasks on time, following rules, and taking ownership of one's actions. When employees share and practise positive values, the workplace becomes safer, more productive, and more supportive for everyone.

Rights at the workplace are protections guaranteed by law and organisational policies. Every worker has the right to be treated with dignity and without discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, age, disability, religion, or background. Employees also have the right to safe and healthy working conditions, fair pay, agreed working hours, rest breaks, and access to clear information about their role and duties. In addition, workers have the right to speak up about problems, unfair treatment, or unsafe conditions without fear of punishment. Knowing one's rights helps individuals protect themselves and seek support when something is wrong.

Alongside rights come **responsibilities**, which are equally important. Employees are responsible for following workplace rules, respecting colleagues and supervisors, and performing their tasks to the best of their ability. This includes arriving on time, using work equipment properly, following safety procedures, and communicating clearly with others. Employees also have a responsibility to manage their behaviour, control emotions, and resolve conflicts in a constructive way rather than through aggression or avoidance.

Values, rights, and responsibilities are closely connected. Rights cannot function well without responsible behaviour, and responsibilities are easier to fulfil when rights are respected. For example, an employee has the right to a safe workplace, but also the responsibility to follow safety instructions. An employee has the right to be treated with respect, but also the responsibility to show respect to others.

Understanding and applying these principles helps individuals build trust, improve relationships at work, and develop a positive professional identity. Over time, this awareness supports personal growth, job stability, and successful integration into the world of work.

Exercise :

Instructions:

Divide participants into small groups. Give each group a set of value cards (e.g. respect, honesty, responsibility, teamwork, fairness, punctuality). Ask them to:

1. Choose three values they believe are most important at work.
2. Discuss why they chose these values.
3. Give one real-life example of how each value can be shown at work.

Reflection questions:

- What happens when these values are ignored?
- Which value is hardest to practise and why?

Exercise 2: Rights or Responsibilities?
Objective: Help participants clearly distinguish between rights and responsibilities.
Instructions:
Read the following statements aloud or write them on a flipchart. Ask participants to decide whether each statement is a **right**, a **responsibility**, or **both**.

- "Being paid on time."
- "Following safety rules."
- "Being treated with respect."
- "Arriving at work on time."
- "Having a safe working environment."
- "Reporting a problem to a supervisor."

Discuss answers together and clarify misunderstandings.
Scenario 1: Respect at the Workplace
Situation:
Ana is new at her job. One colleague often makes jokes about her accent and background. Ana feels uncomfortable but is unsure if she should say anything because she is afraid of losing her job.
Discussion questions:

- What workplace value is being violated?
- What right does Ana have in this situation?
- What would be a responsible way for Ana to respond?
- What role should a supervisor or employer play?

Scenario 2: Safety and Responsibility
Situation:
Mark works in a warehouse. He is in a hurry and decides not to wear protective gloves because "nothing bad will happen." A co-worker notices but says nothing.
Discussion questions:

- What rights are involved in this situation?
- What responsibilities does Mark have?
- What responsibility does the co-worker have?
- What could be the consequences of ignoring safety rules?

Scenario 3: Conflict and Communication
Situation:
Sara and Tom work in the same team. Tom often arrives late, which causes Sara to do more work. Sara becomes angry and stops speaking to him.
Discussion questions:

- What responsibilities are not being respected?
- What values are missing in this situation?
- How could Sara address the problem in a respectful way?
- What could Tom do differently?

Trainer Tip: End the session by asking participants:

- How can understanding values, rights, and responsibilities help you keep a job?
- How can it help you build better relationships at work?

Encourage dialogue, not moral judgement.

VI. Building Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence

Self-esteem and self-confidence are essential life skills that strongly influence how young people see themselves, make decisions, and relate to others. For many young offenders, these skills have been damaged by negative experiences such as repeated failure, rejection, unstable family environments, violence, or constant criticism. As a result, some young people develop a negative self-image, believing they are “not good enough” or that change is impossible. Building self-esteem and self-confidence is therefore a key step toward personal growth, responsibility, and successful reintegration into society.
Self-esteem refers to how a person values themselves as a human being. It is the inner belief that “I have worth” and “I deserve respect,” regardless of past mistakes. Low self-esteem often leads to feelings of shame, anger, or hopelessness, which can increase risky behaviour or aggression. In contrast, healthy self-esteem allows young people to accept responsibility for their actions without seeing themselves as failures. It helps them understand that making mistakes does not define who they are, but that learning from those mistakes does.
Self-confidence is closely connected but focuses on belief in one’s abilities. It is the confidence to try new things, express opinions, ask for help, and face challenges. Many young offenders lack self-confidence because they have experienced repeated criticism or have rarely been praised for positive behaviour. This can lead to avoidance, defensiveness, or acting “tough” to hide insecurity. Developing self-confidence helps young people take constructive risks, such as applying for a job, joining training, or resolving conflicts peacefully.

Building self-esteem and self-confidence is a gradual process. It starts with recognising personal strengths, even small ones. Skills such as showing up on time, helping others, controlling anger in a difficult moment, or completing a task are important achievements. Positive feedback from youth workers, mentors, and peers plays a crucial role in reinforcing these successes. At the same time, young people learn to replace negative self-talk ("I always fail") with more realistic and supportive thoughts ("I am learning" or "I can improve").

A strong sense of self-esteem and self-confidence also supports better decision-making. When young people believe in themselves, they are less likely to seek approval through negative peer pressure and more likely to set personal goals. They begin to see a future beyond their past behaviour and understand that they can choose different paths.

Ultimately, building self-esteem and self-confidence empowers young offenders to take responsibility for their lives, develop resilience, and believe in their ability to change. These skills do not erase past mistakes, but they create the foundation for positive choices, healthy relationships, and long-term reintegration into society.

Exercise 1:

Instructions:

Ask participants to write down (or say aloud) **three things they are good at** or have managed to do in the past month. These can be very simple, such as:

- "I didn't lose my temper in a difficult situation."
- "I helped someone."
- "I showed up on time."
- "I finished a task."

If participants struggle, the facilitator can offer examples or help identify strengths through discussion.

Reflection questions:

- Which strength surprised you?
- How could this strength help you in daily life or work?

Exercise 2: Separating the Person from the Behaviour

Objective: Reduce shame and build healthy self-esteem by separating mistakes from identity.

Instructions:

Write two sentences on a board:

- "I made a bad choice."
- "I am a bad person."

Ask the group:

- Are these sentences the same?
- What is the difference?

Facilitate a discussion about how behaviour can change, while personal value remains.

Key message:
A mistake does not define who you are — it shows what you need to work on.

Exercise 3: Positive Self-Talk Practice
Objective: Help participants replace negative inner dialogue with realistic, supportive thinking.
Instructions:
Give participants a list of common negative thoughts, such as:

- "I will fail anyway."
- "People are judging me."
- "I'm not smart enough."

In small groups, ask them to turn each statement into a **balanced, positive alternative**, for example:

- "I can try and learn, even if I fail."
- "I don't know what others think, but I can focus on my effort."

Scenario 1: "I Can't Do Anything Right"
Situation:
Alex is asked to complete a simple task during training. When he makes a small mistake, he says, "Forget it, I'm useless," and refuses to continue.
Discussion questions:

- What does this say about Alex's self-esteem?
- How could a youth worker or peer respond in a supportive way?
- What could Alex say to himself instead?

Follow-up task:
Ask participants to rewrite Alex's statement in a more constructive way.
Scenario 2: Speaking Up with Confidence
Situation:
During a group activity, one participant constantly interrupts Milan. Milan stays silent and later becomes angry.
Discussion questions:

- What stopped Milan from speaking up?
- How could confidence help in this situation?
- What is a respectful way to express needs?

Role-play option:
Practise simple assertive sentences like:

- “Please let me finish.”
- “I want to share my opinion.”
- What support could help Sara take the first step?

Trainer Tip: You are not there to “fix” participants, but to **support them in discovering their own strengths and capacity for change**

Setting Personal and Professional Goals

Setting personal and professional goals is an important step in building a positive future. For many young offenders, life has often been shaped by short-term decisions, pressure from others, or a focus on immediate survival rather than long-term planning. As a result, thinking about the future can feel confusing, unrealistic, or even frightening. Learning how to set goals helps young people regain a sense of control over their lives and understand that change is possible through small, consistent steps.

A **personal goal** is something that improves an individual’s wellbeing, behaviour, or relationships. This could include managing anger better, improving communication, staying away from negative influences, or building healthier routines. A **professional goal** is related to work, education, or training, such as completing a course, finding a job, learning a skill, or improving punctuality and reliability at work. Both types of goals are connected: personal growth supports professional success, and professional progress strengthens self-esteem and motivation.

Effective goals are **realistic and achievable**. Setting goals that are too big or unclear can lead to frustration and reinforce feelings of failure. Breaking goals into smaller steps makes progress visible and manageable. For example, instead of saying “I want a good job,” a more realistic goal could be “I want to attend all training sessions this month” or “I want to prepare a basic CV.” Each small achievement builds confidence and encourages further effort.

Goal-setting also involves taking responsibility. Young people learn that while they cannot change their past, they can influence their future through choices made today. Obstacles such as fear of failure, lack of support, or negative self-beliefs may

appear along the way. Recognising these barriers and planning how to deal with them is part of the process. Support from mentors, youth workers, and peers plays an important role in keeping motivation high.
By setting personal and professional goals, young offenders begin to move from reacting to situations toward actively shaping their lives. Goals provide direction, structure, and hope, helping young people focus on positive pathways and long-term reintegration into society.

Exercises and Scenarios:
Exercise 1:
Instructions:
Ask participants to think about four areas:

- Personal behaviour
- Education or training
- Work or employment
- Relationships

They choose **one area** and write or say one thing they would like to improve.
Reflection question:

- Why is this area important to you right now?

Exercise 2:
Instructions:
Write a broad dream on the board (e.g. “I want a better life”).
As a group, break it down into:

- One short-term goal (this week or month)
- One concrete action

Example:

- Goal: Attend all programme sessions this week
- Action: Set an alarm and prepare clothes the night before

Exercise 3: Obstacles and Solutions
Objective: Build problem-solving skills around goal-setting.
Instructions:
Ask participants to choose one personal or professional goal and answer:

- What might stop me from reaching this goal?
- Who or what could help me?
- What is one solution I can try?

Scenario 1:

Situation:
Elena starts a training programme but arrives late several times. She says the programme is "boring" and considers quitting.

Discussion questions:

- What professional goal could Elena set?
- How does punctuality relate to future employment?
- What support or structure could help her succeed?

Scenario 2: Conflicting Influences
Situation:
Mark wants to complete a course, but his friends pressure him to skip sessions and "hang out instead."
Discussion questions:

- How do other people influence our goals?
- What personal value is involved in Mark's decision?
- How could Mark protect his goal?

CHAPTER 5 ART THERAPY METHODS



Why Art?

Why Now?

Before you read this paper, you are encouraged to watch the following video:



Ромска сватба / Roma wedding

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipGDol2LE4E&t=7s

What you just saw wasn't simply a performance. It was the endpoint of a process where art became a bridge—between emotion and expression, between isolation and connection, between a closed past and a possible future.

What you saw was transformation. Take a group of young people off the streets, give them to a professional, and give them four months to miraculously change into actors drawing standing ovation from the audience in a fully packed theatre hall.

The following pages aim to introduce you as youth workers to the wonderful world of art and explain to you how it can have a profound impact on young people by providing them with means of expression, motivation, self-esteem and sense of belonging and purpose.

Working with young people in the social or justice system, we often encounter profound barriers: deep distrust of authority, trauma that defies words, and identities shaped by failure and shame. Traditional talk-based approaches can hit a wall. Art therapy methods offer a parallel path…

So, what is this all about…?

At its core, this art therapy is not about creating artists. Even if you have the next Picasso among your group, you won't recognize him or her – you are not an art critic.

Art therapy is all about using the creative process itself to achieve therapeutic and developmental goals. Think of it



as:

- Emotional Regulation: The physical act of sculpting clay, the focused rhythm of drumming, the controlled breathing of singing—these are direct tools for managing arousal, anger, and anxiety, teaching self-regulation through action.



- Identity Exploration & Narrative Change: So many young offenders are trapped in a single, negative story: "I am a delinquent." Art allows them to externalize that story, examine it, and ultimately, rewrite it. They can try on new roles in a play, build a solid object in woodworking, or author a different ending in a story. This builds agency and self-esteem.

- Pro-social Skill-Building: Every group mural, every ensemble drum circle, every forum theatre scene is a microcosm of society. It requires negotiation, turn-taking, attunement to others, and collaborative problem-solving—practicing the very skills that may be lacking.

- Non-Verbal Communication: For when words are too dangerous, too painful, or simply not enough. A drawing, a rhythm, a movement can hold complexities that sentences cannot.

In essence, we use the creative process to directly target particular criminogenic needs:

- impulsivity,
- poor problem-solving,
- negative self-concept,
- impaired social bonds.

- We are not just creating art; we are creating space for change.



HISTORICAL & THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

A Brief History and Development of Art Therapy in Criminal Justice and Youth Offending Contexts

While creative expression has always played a role in human healing and meaning-making, the formal discipline of Art Therapy has relatively recent origins. The term *art therapy* was first coined in 1942 by British artist Adrian Hill while he was recovering from tuberculosis in a sanatorium. Hill observed that drawing and painting helped him cope with isolation, illness, and emotional distress. He later introduced art-making to other patients, discovering that creative activity provided a vital psychological outlet for trauma, boredom, and fear. These early experiences established a foundational idea that remains central to art therapy today: that making images can restore a sense of agency, identity, and emotional balance during periods of crisis.

Hill's insight emerged at a time when psychiatry and psychology were beginning to recognize the importance of emotional expression and unconscious processes. In the decades following World War II, the field of art therapy developed rapidly in Europe and North America, shaped by pioneers who gave it theoretical depth and professional structure. Two of the most influential figures were Margaret Naumburg and Edith Kramer in the United States, whose differing but complementary approaches still inform practice.

Naumburg, a psychologist and educator influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, viewed art as a form of symbolic language. She believed that images created spontaneously by clients revealed unconscious thoughts and feelings that could not easily be expressed in words. She described art as a "royal road to the unconscious," similar to dreams, and developed what became known as the *art psychotherapy* model. In this approach, artwork is used within a therapeutic relationship to support insight, emotional processing, and psychological growth. This emphasis on symbolism, meaning, and emotional communication later became especially important in work with trauma survivors and emotionally dysregulated clients.

Edith Kramer, by contrast, emphasized the healing power of the creative process itself. Drawing on psychoanalytic and developmental theory, she argued that making art helps individuals contain difficult feelings, develop ego strength, and transform impulses into socially acceptable forms. This became known as the *art as therapy* approach. Kramer saw artistic mastery, concentration, and sublimation as intrinsically therapeutic, even without verbal interpretation. This approach has proven particularly relevant in settings where clients may resist verbal therapy or lack the language to describe their inner experiences.

Together, these two traditions laid the foundation for modern art therapy, creating a flexible field that could be adapted to a wide range of populations and environments.

From Clinical Settings to Forensic and Community Contexts

Throughout the mid-twentieth century, art therapy became established in psychiatric hospitals, child guidance clinics, and rehabilitation centers. However, by the 1970s and 1980s, it began to move beyond clinical institutions into schools, community programs, and forensic settings. This expansion reflected broader social and

professional shifts: the rise of community mental health, increased awareness of trauma, and growing concern about the limitations of purely punitive approaches to crime—especially in relation to young people.

Youth offending has long been closely linked with trauma, social exclusion, poverty, family instability, and disrupted attachment. Many young people involved in the justice system have experienced neglect, violence, loss, or chronic stress. These experiences often impair emotional regulation, trust, and verbal communication. Traditional “talk-based” therapies may therefore feel threatening, confusing, or



inaccessible. Art therapy offered an alternative pathway into emotional expression and self-understanding.

Practitioners working in youth justice settings began to notice that art-making could bypass defensiveness and resistance. A young person who refused to speak about their feelings might still draw, paint, sculpt, or design. Through images, they could communicate anger, fear, shame, grief, and identity struggles in a way that felt safer and more indirect. This made art therapy especially well-suited to young offenders in both custodial and community-based programs.

In secure facilities, art therapy was introduced to help reduce aggression, support emotional regulation, and provide constructive ways to cope with confinement. In

community settings—such as probation services, youth offending teams, and diversion programs—it became a tool for engagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration. Art therapy was increasingly recognized not merely as an activity, but as a structured psychotherapeutic intervention.

Art Therapy and Trauma in Young Offenders

One of the most significant reasons for the success of art therapy in youth justice contexts is its compatibility with trauma-informed care. Research consistently shows that a high proportion of young people in the criminal justice system have experienced complex trauma, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence, community violence, and abandonment. Trauma often affects the brain's ability to process emotions and memories, leaving young people prone to impulsivity, dissociation, and intense emotional reactions.

Because traumatic memories are often stored in sensory and visual form rather than verbal narrative, art-making provides a natural bridge to these experiences. Creating images allows young people to externalize internal chaos, making it visible, manageable, and shareable. The artwork becomes a container for overwhelming feelings that might otherwise be acted out through aggression or self-destructive behavior.

In community-based justice programs, art therapy can also support identity development. Many young offenders have internalized negative labels—"criminal," "failure," "troublemaker." Through creative expression, they can explore alternative self-representations and strengths. A drawing, mural, or personal symbol can help them construct a new narrative about who they are and who they might become.

The Shift Toward Rehabilitation and Desistance

The growth of art therapy in youth justice also parallels a broader shift in criminal justice philosophy. Over the past several decades, many systems have moved away from purely punitive models toward approaches focused on rehabilitation, desistance, and restorative justice. These approaches recognize that long-term public safety is best achieved not through punishment alone, but through addressing the emotional, social, and psychological factors that contribute to offending.

Art therapy fits naturally within this framework. It supports emotional awareness, impulse control, empathy, and reflective thinking—core capacities associated with

desistance from crime. Group art therapy can also foster peer connection, cooperation, and communication, counteracting the isolation and mistrust that often characterize justice-involved youth.

In community settings, art therapy projects—such as public murals, exhibitions, or digital storytelling—can also promote social inclusion. By sharing their work, young people can be seen not only as offenders, but as artists, storytellers, and contributors to their communities. This shift in public and self-perception is an important part of reintegration.

Contemporary Practice and Professionalization

Today, art therapy is a regulated profession in many countries, including the United Kingdom, United States, and Australia. Practitioners working in forensic and youth justice contexts receive specialized training in trauma, safeguarding, and ethical practice. Art therapy is increasingly supported by research demonstrating its effectiveness in reducing emotional distress, improving self-regulation, and increasing engagement in treatment among justice-involved youth.

Contemporary models integrate psychodynamic, humanistic, cognitive-behavioral, and neurobiological perspectives. Many practitioners now work within multidisciplinary teams alongside psychologists, social workers, probation officers, and educators. In community youth justice programs, art therapists often play a key role in engaging young people who would otherwise disengage from services.

Despite these developments, the core principle identified by Adrian Hill remains unchanged: that creative expression can be profoundly healing. Whether in a hospital ward, a prison art room, or a community youth center, the act of making images allows individuals to reclaim their voice, process their experiences, and imagine new possibilities.

Thus, the history of art therapy, from its origins in illness and recovery to its application in youth justice, reflects a growing understanding of the human need for expression, meaning, and connection. For young people in the criminal justice system—many of whom have been silenced, stigmatized, or traumatized—art therapy offers a unique and powerful pathway to communication and change. By bridging emotion, identity, and creativity, it supports not only healing, but the possibility of a different future.

Art therapy and Art

Before we proceed to insist that in art therapy the process and not the outcome is what matters most, we're obliged to acknowledge that there are some genuinely fascinating cases where people who first made art in therapeutic or institutional settings later became internationally recognised artists. While they were not always "art therapists' clients" in the modern sense, their work emerged from exactly the kind of "hospital, asylum, or rehabilitative environments" that gave rise to art therapy.

Here are a few of the most important ones, especially relevant to trauma, marginalisation, and justice-adjacent contexts:

Adolf Wölfli (1864–1930)

Probably the most famous example, Wölfli was confined to a Swiss psychiatric hospital after being convicted of attempted child abuse and experiencing severe psychosis. He began drawing and writing obsessively while institutionalised.

Doctors noticed that his violent behaviour decreased when he was making art. A psychiatrist named Walter Morgenthaler encouraged him to continue, preserved his work, and published a book about him in 1921 — one of the first times patient art was taken seriously.

Wölfli created:

- Over 25,000 pages of drawings, music, and texts
- Vast imaginary worlds and autobiographies
- Extremely intricate, rhythmic, symbolic imagery

Today, his work hangs in major museums, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Importantly, Wölfli is one of the key figures behind what later became known as *Art Brut* or *Outsider Art* — art made outside the academic or commercial system, often by people in institutions.

Aloïse Corbaz (1886–1964)

Corbaz was hospitalised for schizophrenia and spent most of her life in Swiss psychiatric institutions. She began drawing obsessively, especially images of:

- Romantic fantasy
- Royal figures
- Female power and sexuality

Her art was preserved and later exhibited by doctors who recognised its expressive power. Like Wölfli, she became a central figure in the Art Brut movement.

Her work is now held in major collections across Europe.

Henry Darger (1892–1973)

Darger was not in therapy, but he was a profoundly traumatised, institutionalised child who grew up in abusive care homes and asylums. He later lived in extreme isolation.

In private, he created:

- A 15,000-page illustrated epic
- Hundreds of paintings depicting war, abuse, and resistance

After his death, his landlord discovered his artwork. He is now considered one of the most important self-taught artists of the 20th century.

Darger is often cited in art therapy literature as an example of *art as survival* — how creative expression can contain unbearable trauma.

Judith Scott (1943–2005)

Scott was born with Down syndrome and was deaf, and she spent most of her early life in institutions. In adulthood she joined a creative arts program for people with disabilities, similar in spirit to art therapy.

She began wrapping found objects in yarn and thread, creating dense sculptural forms. Her work gained international recognition and is now in major museums.

Scott is a powerful example of how *non-verbal creative expression* can reveal complex inner worlds — a central principle of art therapy.

Why this matters for youth justice & art therapy

These artists were not “trained” in art — they were *driven to create* because art was the only way to:

- Process trauma
- Organise inner chaos
- Tell their story
- Maintain a sense of self

This is exactly what happens when young people in justice systems use art in therapeutic settings. They may not all become famous artists — but the same psychological process is at work: ***art as a way to survive, to speak, and to transform pain into meaning.***

The Recognized Arts – A Therapeutic Toolkit

In art therapy, "art" is defined broadly and inclusively. It is less about technical skill and more about the choice of medium that best serves the individual's need for expression. We generally categorize these into several key families, all of which can be powerful in a youth justice context.

- The Visual Arts:
  This is the most traditional category. It includes drawing, painting, sculpture, collage, and printmaking. These are tangible, visual, and often silent processes. They are excellent for externalizing inner worlds, making abstract feelings concrete, and practicing focus and fine motor control. A young person might express rage through bold, red strokes in a painting more safely than through physical action.
- The Performing Arts:
  This encompasses theatre/ drama, dance/ movement, and music. These are embodied, often communal, and exist in time. They are ideal for practicing social roles, regulating the body's response to stress (through rhythm or movement), and experiencing immediate cause-and-effect. Playing a drum in a circle requires listening and synchronizing—a direct metaphor for prosocial behavior.
- The Literary Arts:
  This includes storytelling, poetry, journaling, and scriptwriting. These forms use narrative and metaphor as tools. They help organize chaotic experiences into a coherent story, which can reframe a personal narrative from one of shame to one of survival or learning. Writing a poem about a "mask" can explore themes of identity and what is hidden versus shown to the world.

- Modern & Applied Arts:

To be relevant, we must include forms that resonate with youth culture. This can mean digital arts (digital photography, video editing), filmmaking, graphic novel creation, or even the intentional, legal use of graffiti/street art techniques. These mediums can bridge the gap between institutional activity and a youth's personal identity, fostering engagement and a sense of contemporary relevance.

A Unifying Definition

Across all these forms, a working definition of art therapy for our context is:

"The intentional use of creative processes, facilitated within a purposeful relationship, to support emotional well-being, develop social skills, and explore identity, with the primary focus on the person and the process, not the aesthetic product."

APPLICATION IN YOUTH JUSTICE

Traditional Art Forms in Rehabilitation – Evidence in Action

Before we move to the Guidelines to look at specific session plans, it's powerful to see how these art forms have already been applied successfully in youth justice and social rehabilitation settings globally. These aren't theoretical ideas; they are practices with documented benefits. Each form targets specific criminogenic or developmental needs.

- Mural Projects: A classic in community rehabilitation. A group of young people plans and executes a large-scale public mural. This is about legacy, teamwork, and negotiation. They must collaborate, delegate tasks, and compromise on a shared vision. The public nature provides positive recognition, literally repainting their identity in the community from "offender" to "contributor." It targets poor social bonding, low self-efficacy, and negative social identity.

- Lyric Writing & Rap Workshops: This form meets young people where they are, using a culturally relevant medium. Facilitators guide youth in writing lyrics about their experiences, hopes, or challenges, often focusing on metaphor and rhythm. This activity validates their voice and linguistic creativity in a structured way. It provides a safe container for expressing anger, grief, or

frustration. The process of rewriting and refining lyrics directly practices impulse control (moving from first draft to edited version) and cognitive reframing (finding a more nuanced way to say something). It builds communication skills and emotional literacy.

- Drama & Role-Play (Beyond Boal): Even simpler than Forum Theatre, structured role-play is a staple. Young people might act out a job interview, a conflict with a probation officer, or a peer pressure scenario. This rehearses for real life in a low-stakes environment. By physically "stepping into" another role, they practice perspective-taking and empathy. It targets poor problem-solving skills, cognitive distortions ("everyone disses me"), and a lack of prosocial scripts for difficult situations.

- Woodworking & Carpentry: These are process-based, material-focused arts. The task is clear: measure, cut, sand, assemble. It offers immediate, tangible feedback—a board is either the right length or it isn't. This teaches consequential thinking, patience, and the experience of mastery. The pride of creating a usable object, like a bench or a box, directly combats feelings of



worthlessness and a lack of future orientation. It proves, "I can build, not just destroy."

- Autobiographical Comics/Graphic Novels: This combines visual art with narrative. Young people create a short comic about a chapter of their life. The panel-by-panel structure breaks down overwhelming experiences into manageable frames. They can depict themselves as a character, which provides psychological distance to process trauma. They control the narrative: they are the author, artist, and protagonist. This is profoundly empowering for those who feel their life story has been written for them by courts, social workers, or circumstances. It targets traumatic memory integration and a negative, fixed self-concept.

The key insight here is that the medium itself carries therapeutic properties. The social collaboration of a mural, the verbal processing of lyric writing, the embodied rehearsal of drama, the logical sequence of woodworking—each naturally challenges specific risk factors.

PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR YOUTH WORKERS

Your Role & Critical Principles

Before we plan a single activity, we must ground ourselves in the core philosophy of our role. You are not an art therapist. You are a facilitator, a witness, and a holder of safe space. Your expertise lies in group work and relationship-building, not in clinical interpretation. This distinction is vital for ethical practice and for your own confidence.

The Three Pillars of Practice:

- Safety is Everything: This means both physical safety (a clean, respectful space, safe materials) and emotional safety. Establish clear, co-created group agreements: confidentiality, right to pass, no judgment of others' art. This is the non-negotiable foundation.
- Choice is Empowerment: Offer options. "You can use clay, markers, or collage.", "You can write, draw, or just think about the theme." Forced

participation re-enacts coercion. Choice fosters ownership and genuine engagement.

- Process Over Product: This is the most important principle. We are not here to make gallery-worthy art. We are here for the experience of creation. The scribbled drawing that released tension is more "successful" than a beautifully rendered picture made to please you. Let go of aesthetic judgment entirely!

The Golden Rule of Response: **NEVER INTERPRET**.

If a young person shows you their work, your role is to be a curious, respectful observer. Ask open, process-focused questions:

"Would you like to tell me about this?"

"I notice you used a lot of blue here. What's happening in this part?"

"What title would you give this piece?"

Avoid at all costs: "This dark figure clearly represents your depression," or "That's a beautiful house, you must be happy." Interpretation is invasive and can be deeply wrong. Your job is to help them find their own meaning.

Managing Difficult Situations

This is a crucial moment. It requires from you to understand the real-world anxieties of your young people and empowers you to handle moments that might otherwise make them abandon the approach.

Even with perfect planning, challenging moments will arise. These are not failures; they are moments of data and opportunity. How we respond can either escalate the situation or build trust. Here are scripts grounded in safety, empathy, and validation.

Scenario 1: A youth destroys their own work (crumples drawing, smashes clay).

What it might mean: Overwhelm, frustration, feeling the work isn't "good enough," or a re-enactment of self-sabotage.

Your Response (Calm, observational):

"I can see you're really frustrated with that. That's okay. The art is yours to do what you need with. Would you like to take a break, or would you like some fresh paper/clay if you want to try something else?"

Why it works:

Validates the emotion, reaffirms their autonomy over their creation, and offers a forward path without shame.



Scenario 2: A youth refuses to participate.

What it might mean: Anxiety, control-testing, disengagement, or a need to observe first.

Your Response (Offering choice & dignity):

"That's completely okay. You have the right to pass. You're welcome to just be here with us and observe. If you change your mind, the materials are here for you."

Why it works:

Respects their "no," removes the power struggle, and keeps the door open. Often, observing safely leads to later participation.

Scenario 3: A youth creates violent or disturbing imagery.

This is the most critical one to handle correctly.

What it might mean: Externalizing internal turmoil, communicating pain, testing boundaries, or simply exploring a theme from media.

Your response (Curious, non-alarmed, process-focused):

AVOID: "That's terrible!" or "Why would you draw that?"

DO SAY: "Thank you for sharing that. Would you be willing to tell me about what's happening in this picture?" or "I see there's a lot of intensity here. What title would you give this piece?"

The Next Step:

If the content is explicitly threatening toward a specific person, you have a safeguarding duty to follow your institution's protocol. For general violent imagery, your calm, curious response de-escalates and opens communication. It treats the image as a message to be understood, not a behavior to be condemned.

Golden Rule in Crisis:

Your primary goal is not to analyze the art, but to manage the emotional state of the person and the group. Safety first, curiosity second.

KEY TAKEAWAYS & INTEGRATION

Core messages

As we bring our exploration to a close, let's crystallize the core messages that bridge all these methods, from Forum Theatre to a simple drum circle. These are the principles you can carry into any context.

- Art is a Primary Language, Not a Decoration: For many young people, especially those who have experienced trauma or distrust verbal systems, creative expression is a more direct, safer, and more honest form of communication. Your role is to become fluent in facilitating that language.
- The Process is the Therapy: We must internalize this. The transformation happens in the doing—in the negotiation during a mural planning session, in the focused silence of shaping a clay form, in the shared pulse of a rhythm. The final product is merely a record of that journey. Let go of aesthetic expectations.

- Structure Liberates, It Does Not Constrain: The frameworks we've discussed—the six-part story, the forum theatre model, the collage theme—are not boxes. They are containers. For young people with chaotic experiences, these clear, safe containers provide the necessary boundaries within which true freedom of expression and risk-taking can occur.
- You Are the Instrument of Safety and Curiosity: The most important tool in the room is you—your calm presence, your adherence to the group agreements, and your ability to ask, "Would you like to tell me about this?" instead of interpreting. Your non-judgmental curiosity models a new way of relating.

Art therapy methods do not work in spite of the challenges young offenders face; they work precisely because they address them at their root: offering non-verbal outlets for dysregulated emotions, structured spaces to practice new social scripts, and opportunities to rebuild a sense of self through creation rather than destruction.

Discussion & Forward Path

Before you move on to the Guidelines, eager to try out your newly acquired skills, let's first think not just about the ideas, but about their application in your diverse realities. This is a chance to share wisdom and troubleshoot together.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Adaptation:
  "Looking at the activities we've covered, which one feels most adaptable or resonant with the cultural context and specific setting (e.g., secure unit, community centre, street work) where you operate?"
  “What small modification would you make to it?"
- Anticipating Challenges:
  "What is the primary logistical or relational hurdle you foresee in trying this? Is it materials, space, group volatility, or perhaps your own feeling of being 'not artistic'?"
  If it is the last one— don’t worry, it's common and it’s okay! You are not an artist, you’re a youth worker.
- First Step:
  "If you were to commit to trying one single element from today in the next month, what would it be?”

"Could you simply try introducing a 5-minute silent drawing warm-up or a drum circle to your existing sessions?"

A Forward Path

If you don't know well your group, your arts or yourself, aim to start not with a grand masterpiece, but with a micro-activity. One warm-up. One meeting check-in using a popular metaphor ("What weather are you today?").

Consistency with a small, safe creative ritual builds trust and opens the door to deeper work. Your confidence will grow with practice.

Further in the Guidelines you will find several tried and tested methods to engage young people in art therapeutic activities that are easy to organize and implement.

Further Resources

To support your continued learning and practice, here are a few key resources that can serve as reliable guides. These are starting points for deepening your understanding ethically and effectively.

Key Books & Theorists:

General Art Therapy: Cathy A. Malchiodi, "The Art Therapy Sourcebook" and "Handbook of Art Therapy." Accessible, comprehensive foundations.

Drama & Theatre: Augusto Boal, "Theatre of the Oppressed." The foundational text for Forum Theatre.

Trauma-Informed Practice: Bruce D. Perry & Maia Szalavitz, "The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog." Not art-specific, but essential reading on trauma's impact on youth, which underpins the why of our work.

Practice Ethics:

Look for the ethical guidelines for arts in health or community practice from a reputable body in your country or region (e.g., The British Association of Art Therapists, ANZACATA). Understand the boundaries of your role.

A Final, Crucial Note on Ethics: As we close, remember the core ethical stance: Know your limits. Your work is facilitation, not therapy. Build a network for

supervision and know when and how to refer a young person to a clinical art therapist or other mental health professional. Your empowered, ethical practice ensures sustainability and safety for all.

GUIDELINES FOR YOUTH WORKERS ON APPLYING ART THERAPY METHODS

Educational Theatre



Developed by Brazilian visionary Augusto Boal in the 1970s, the model of “Forum Theatre” is a cornerstone of applied drama in social justice work. It transforms the audience from passive spectators into active "spect-actors." The core philosophy is rehearsal for reality—practicing change in a safe space to empower it in real life.

What It Is: A short play (or "model") is created by the participants, depicting a scene of a specific oppression or conflict relevant to their lives—for example, a confrontation with a police officer, a peer pressure scenario to commit a crime, or a frustrating interaction with a social worker. The scene ends negatively for the protagonist. It is then performed a second time. Now, any audience member can shout "Stop!", step into the protagonist's role, and try out a different action to change the outcome. The scene becomes a live laboratory for problem-solving.

You as youth worker are there to facilitate and bring order to the process and, if necessary, gently guide the young people toward a range of pro-social alternatives.

Basic Instructions for a Session (90-min version):

1. Warm-up & Trust Building (15 min)

Physical games that break down barriers, exercises in mirroring, and sound-and-movement sequences to create a cohesive, non-judgmental group energy.

2. Theme Exploration (20 min)

In small group(s), participants brainstorm and select a common, difficult situation they face. They outline the characters, the conflict, and the oppressive outcome.

3. Creating & Rehearsing the "Model" (25 min)

Groups solidify their short scene (3-5 minutes long). Emphasize clarity: Who is the protagonist? What do they want? What's stopping them?

4. The Forum (25 min)

A group performs. After the first run, the facilitator (the "Joker") invites the spect-actors to intervene. After each intervention, the group discusses: "Did that work? What changed?" The goal isn't a "magic fix" but to explore multiple possibilities.

5. Closing Circle (5 min)

Brief reflection on feelings and insights gained.

How Forum Theater helps overcome criminogenic factors:

- *Changes Narratives:*
  It physically demonstrates that a single story (the initial negative outcome) is not fixed. It actively rewrites it, challenging a fatalistic worldview.
- *Builds Agency & Problem-Solving:*
  It provides the direct, embodied experience of empowerment: "I can intervene and change the course of events." This targets learned helplessness and impulsivity by practicing considered action.
- *Develops Empathy & Perspective-Taking:*
  By stepping into different roles (oppressor, ally, protagonist), participants literally see the situation from many other perspectives, thus challenging cognitive distortions and rigid thinking.
- *Enables Expression in a Controlled Frame:*
  Anger and frustration are channeled into the fictional conflict, making them manageable and observable

Narrative exploration: Storytelling

Storytelling in therapy isn't about telling fairy tales although fairy tales are a common and useful tool. It's about recognizing that we live by the stories we tell about ourselves ("I'm a failure," "No one trusts me"). Narrative practices help externalize the problem — separating the person from the issue — and author a preferred, more empowering story.

What It Is: Using published stories, metaphors, or structured writing/drawing exercises to safely explore personal experience. The "Six-Part Story Method" is a perfect example. It's a wonderfully simple yet profound structured drawing/writing exercise from narrative therapy.

You ask the participant to create a story in six parts by drawing:

- A main character,
- A task or goal for that character,
- An obstacle,
- A helper,
- How the helper assists in overcoming the obstacle, and
- The final outcome.

It's a "projective" tool—the story they create often mirrors their own internal world, struggles, and resources in a symbolic, safe way. It's excellent for assessment and for kick-starting the narrative process.

Basic Instructions for a Session (Using the Six-Part Story Method, 60-75 min):

1. *Introduction & Safety (5 min)*

Explain this is about a story, not necessarily your story. Focus on imagination.

2. *Creation (30 min)*

Provide paper and markers. Slowly read the six prompts, one at a time, giving time to draw each part. Encourage simplicity; this is not about art skill.

3. *Sharing & Exploration (Voluntary, 25 min)*

Invite those willing to share their story. Use curious, non-interpretive questions: "Tell me about this character." "What's special about this helper?" "What name would you give this obstacle?" Never say, "This obstacle is clearly your anger."

4. *Linking (10 min)*

Gently facilitate group reflection: "Did anyone discover a helper in their story they hadn't thought about before? How might that helper appear in real life?"

How Storytelling helps overcome criminogenic factors:

- *Changes Narratives:*
  Directly challenges negative self-concepts ("I'm a delinquent") by externalizing problems ("How does 'Anger' trick you?") and uncovering hidden strengths (the "Helper").
- *Processes Trauma Safely*:
  Metaphor provides psychological distance. Discussing "the character's fear" is less threatening than discussing "your fear," allowing traumatic material to be approached indirectly.
- *Improves Self-Esteem*:
  The act of creating a coherent story provides a sense of mastery. Identifying a "Helper" in the story helps participants recognize internal and external resources they already possess.
- *Builds Cognitive Skills:*
  Structuring a beginning, middle, and end practices sequential thinking and cause-effect reasoning, countering impulsive, disjointed thought patterns.

"Emotional Landscapes" Collage

This is a superb first session activity. It's highly accessible (no drawing skill needed), visually engaging, and focuses on identifying and externalizing emotions—a foundational step in emotional literacy.

What It Is & What materials you need: Using pre-cut images from magazines, old books, and colored paper, participants create a visual map or "landscape" that represents their inner emotional world. Materials: A large stack of varied magazines, scissors, glue sticks, large sheets of paper or card (A3 or bigger).

Basic Instructions (90-min session):

1. *Warm-up (10 min)*

"Silent Drawing." Put on instrumental music. Everyone gets a scrap paper and a marker. Just make marks on the page that match the music—no talking, no representation. This quiets the inner critic.

2. *Theme Introduction & Browsing (20 min)*

Introduce the theme: "We all have a whole world of feelings inside. Your task is to find images, colours, textures, or words that could represent different parts of that world—like calm, anger, hope, confusion, strength, loneliness. There's no right or wrong." Let them browse and cut out in silence.

3. *Creation Time (40 min)*

Participants assemble their landscapes on the large paper. Encourage them to think about composition: Is one feeling overwhelming? Is there a boundary or a safe space? Is there a journey? Facilitator circulates, making supportive, non-interpretive comments: "You're gathering a lot of powerful images there."

4. *Sharing & Closing (20 min, always voluntary)*

In a circle, invite those who wish to share. Use your open questions: "Would you like to walk us through your landscape?" "Is there an area you feel most connected to right now?" Thank everyone for their work. No one is forced to explain.

Criminogenic factors addressed:

- *Emotional Literacy & Impulsivity:*
  The primary goal. It names and externalizes complex, often confusing internal states. Putting "anger" on the page as a ripped, red image creates a psychological space between feeling the emotion and acting on it, building that crucial "pause."
- *Poor Self-Awareness:*
  It fosters introspection in a concrete, visual way. A youth might realize, "I have a lot of 'chaos' in my landscape, but I also found this small, bright image of a sun—I guess that's hope."
- *Communication Skills:*
  It provides a non-threatening way to communicate something personal to the group or facilitator, building trust.

"Body Sculpture"

This is a powerful, movement-based activity that requires no words, making it ideal for groups with high tension, low verbal skills, or distrust. It focuses on embodied expression, group cooperation, and metaphorical thinking.

What It Is: Participants use their own bodies, individually and in small groups, to create frozen statues ("tableaux") that represent abstract concepts, relationships, or emotional states. It is silent, focused, and deeply physical.

Basic Instructions (75-min session):

1. *Warm-up & Physical Agreement (15 min)*

Lead gentle, non-contact movement exercises (shaking out limbs, stretching, mirroring in pairs). Establish a sacred rule: We move our own bodies; we do not touch or move others without explicit consent.

2. *Individual Sculptures (15 min)*

Call out simple, abstract words: "Anger." "Isolation." "Pride." "Peace." Give participants 60 seconds each to create a frozen body shape that represents that word. No right or wrong.

3. *Group Sculptures (30 min)*

Divide into small groups (3-4 people). Give them a relational or thematic prompt: "A Conflict," "Support," "A Turning Point," "The Future." Their task is to collaborate silently to create one frozen picture with their bodies. They must use eye contact and gesture to plan. Give them 5-7 minutes to prepare.

4. *"Gallery Walk" & Reflection (15 min)*

Each group presents their tableau. The "audience" observes first in silence, then shares what they see (not what they interpret): "I see one person turned away, two people connected." Then the creating group can share one word about their experience (e.g., "heavy," "connected").

Criminogenic factors addressed:

- *Impulsivity & Physical Regulation:*
  The discipline of moving slowly into a frozen pose, and holding it, requires and teaches bodily control.
- *Non-Verbal Communication & Teamwork:*

The silent group task forces cooperation through gesture, eye contact, and shared focus, building prosocial skills without the pressure of words.

- *Perspective-Taking:*
  Viewing the tableaux of others and describing what is physically seen practices objective observation, a skill needed to challenge subjective, distorted interpretations of social situations.
- *Expression of Difficult Concepts*:
  It allows for the expression of themes like conflict, power, or isolation in a metaphorical, contained way, which can feel safer than talking about them directly.

THE POWER OF MUSIC

Music is primal, communal, and bypasses the cognitive defenses of the cerebral cortex to speak directly to the emotional limbic system.

In work with young offenders, it is less about talent and all about participation, rhythm, and shared creation. It offers a non-verbal language for emotions that are too complex or dangerous to speak.

Accessible, low-barrier activities like group drumming, collaborative songwriting, learning simple chord progressions on resilient instruments (ukulele, cajón, keyboards), or vocal work (chanting, group singing). The focus is on the process of making sound together.

Drum Circle

What It Is:

For the purpose of this Guidelines we are proposing a drum circle: a group music activity that does not require any playing skills, but asks for careful listening, remembering and following the rhythm.

Basic Instructions for a Session (Group Drum Circle, 30 min):

1. *Establish the Space (5 min)*

Sit in a circle. Lay out simple rules: "We start together, we end together. Listen as much as you play."

2. *Finding the Pulse (5 min)*

Start with a simple, slow heartbeat rhythm. Facilitator mirrors and slightly varies it. Use call-and-response: the facilitator plays a 4-beat pattern, group echoes it.

3. *Building the Conversation (15 min)*

Invite a volunteer to be the "lead drummer" for a minute, with others supporting. Encourage non-verbal communication through eye contact and dynamics (loud/soft, fast/slow).

4. *Crescendo & Release (5 min)*

Guide the group to a collective, energetic peak, then gradually bring it down to a single, shared final beat.

5. *Reflection (5 min)*

"How did it feel to be in sync? What happened when we listened vs. when we all played solo?"

How It helps overcome criminogenic factors:

- *Regulates Emotion & Impulsivity:*
  Rhythmic, repetitive drumming is neurologically regulating. It can lower cortisol (stress hormone) and provide a structured outlet for agitation, directly targeting hyper-arousal and poor impulse control.
- *Enables Non-Verbal Expression & Release:*
  For youth who are "closed off" or distrust words, hitting a drum can be a safe expression of anger, frustration, or energy. Singing can release tension and create catharsis.
- *Builds Prosocial Skills & Synchronization:*
  A drum circle requires listening, turn-taking, and attuning to others to sound good. It is a direct, real-time exercise in social bonding, cooperation, and reading non-verbal cues.
- *Improves Self-Esteem & Motivation:*
  The immediate feedback of creating a sound, mastering a simple rhythm, or contributing to a group piece provides a quick win. This sense of competence and belonging is a powerful motivator and antidote to feelings of worthlessness.

"Found Sound" Rhythm & Story

This music activity requires zero traditional instruments and immediately demystifies music-making. It builds on the universal human tendency to create rhythm and is incredibly effective for building group cohesion and releasing energy.

What It Is & Materials: Using "found objects" in the room (chairs, floors, pens, books, our own bodies) or during walks in town or in nature, as well as our voices, in order to create rhythmic patterns and soundscapes that tell a micro-story.

Materials: As minimum, just the room and its contents. Objects found by the young people in their spare time are welcome.



Basic Instructions (60-min session):

1. *Creating the "Orchestra" (10 min)*

Explore the room. "What sounds can your chair make? Your pen on the table? Your hands on your knees?" Practice a few as a group (e.g., everyone clicks pens twice).

2. *Building a Collective Rhythm (20 min)*

Start a simple, slow 4-beat pulse by stomping your foot. Invite others to join. Then, as the facilitator, you become a "conductor." Point to a section of the group to add their sound (e.g., all chair-scrapers), then another (e.g., all hand-clappers). Layer them in and out. Play with volume and speed.

3. *Sound Story Challenge (25 min)*

Give small groups a simple, 3-part story prompt: "The Calm Before the Storm – The Storm – The Calm After." Their task is to use only sounds (no words) to tell this story in 60 seconds. Give them 10 minutes to plan.

4. *Performance & Reflection (15 min)*

Groups perform. After each, ask: "What did you hear? What feeling did that section create?" Link it to emotional arcs: "Our emotions have rhythms and storms too, and they always change."

Criminogenic factors addressed:

- *Impulse Control & Synchronization:*
  Following a collective pulse and waiting for the "conductor's" cue directly practices delayed response and attunement to others, countering impulsive action.
- *Frustration Tolerance & Creative Problem-Solving:*
  The constraint of "no instruments" turns a problem into a creative challenge, building flexible thinking.
- *Positive Group Energy & Catharsis:*
  Making loud, rhythmic sound together is inherently energizing and can healthily disperse tension and aggression in a coordinated, shared way.
- *Communication & Shared Purpose:*
  Creating a "sound story" requires intense non-verbal negotiation and a shared goal, fostering a powerful sense of belonging and achievement.

Some more music activities…

1. The Human Orchestra (Vocal Soundscapes)

Activity:

As a group, create the sound of a storm, a city, or a jungle using only voices and body percussion. Facilitator conducts: "Let's start with wind (shhh sounds). Add some distant thunder (stomping feet). Now some rain (finger snaps). A sudden crack of lightning (a collective clap!)".

Why it works:

Zero instruments, zero skill. It's about listening, blending, and collective storytelling. Builds group cohesion and attentive listening.

2. One-Rhythm Story:

Activity:

Establish a simple, looped rhythm (e.g., clap-clap-stomp). Once the group can hold it, go around the circle. Each person must say one word (or one short line) that fits the rhythm, building a collective poem or story. "I - see - a - dog" (clap-clap-stomp). Next: "He - runs - so - fast" (clap-clap-stomp).

Why it works:

Combines rhythm with verbal creativity within a tight, simple structure. It's playful, requires focus, and connects language to pulse.

3. Chair Drumming:

Activity:

Everyone sits on a chair. Explore all the sounds a chair can make: tapping feet, slapping the seat, scraping legs on the floor, knocking on the back. Assign different sounds to small groups. Conduct the group like an orchestra, pointing to bring groups in and out.

Why it works:

Uses a ubiquitous object, instantly demystifying "music." It's physically active, channels energy, and teaches structured, responsive listening.

4. Call and Response with Found Sounds:

Activity:

The facilitator creates a 4-beat pattern using any object (pen on bottle, keys jangling, book slap). The group must echo it exactly in timbre and rhythm. Then, invite participants to become the leader.

Why it works:

It's a game of precise listening and imitation, a core musical (and social) skill. It empowers individuals to lead and be mirrored in a safe, non-verbal way.

5. Emotional Soundtrack (Drawing to Sound):

Activity:

This reverses the process. Give everyone paper. Ask them to draw lines, shapes, and scribbles in direct response to a piece of instrumental music you play (choose something without lyrics, with clear emotional shifts). Then, play a second piece with a different mood. Afterwards, discuss: "How did your hand want to move to the angry music vs. the calm music?"

Why it works:

Connects music to kinaesthetic and visual expression. It highlights how sound directly alters our physical state and emotional landscape, fostering self-awareness.

Other methods…

There are numerous art methods that can be applied by a youth worker without any prior skills or difficult to obtain materials. You are encouraged to do further research on the internet for creative inspiration.

Here are some more ideas, not explained in detail:

- Clay working
- Bread making/ Dough kneading
- Easiest of them all, and suitable for your younger participants: Plasticine sculpting



CHAPTER 6: STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT OF YOUNG OFFENDERS

6.1. Introduction and Purpose

This manual provides practical guidance for youth workers, municipalities, NGOs, schools, community organisations and other local actors who want to encourage meaningful community involvement in activities involving young people with offending backgrounds. It is developed for the Erasmus+ Y REACH project – Youth Reintegration through Enhanced Adolescent Cross-disciplinary Help – and is based on the project training materials on Community Engagement and Building Community Partnerships.

The central idea is simple: reintegration cannot be achieved by young people and youth workers alone. It requires a community that is willing to listen, participate,

cooperate and gradually build trust. Community engagement therefore should not be treated as a final dissemination activity. It should be integrated from the first stages of identifying a local challenge through consultation, project design, implementation, communication and sustainability.
The manual uses the Y REACH approach in which youth workers act as Active Mentors. Their role is not to design solutions for young people, but to support them in developing, presenting and implementing their own ideas with the local community.

6.2. Understanding Community Engagement

Community engagement means creating meaningful interaction between young people, community members and institutions around common local needs and challenges. It goes beyond informing people about an activity. Effective engagement gives local actors an opportunity to contribute ideas, provide resources, participate in decisions and share responsibility for results.
Within Y REACH, community engagement should create opportunities for young people to become visible through positive roles. Instead of being known only through past difficulties, they can participate as project leaders, volunteers, team members and youth ambassadors.

- Engagement creates dialogue rather than one-way communication.
- It involves communities early, not only after decisions have already been made.
- It encourages co-creation of solutions to real local challenges.
- It creates opportunities for young people to demonstrate responsibility and contribution.
- It helps communities become partners in reintegration.

6.3. Why Community Involvement Matters

The training materials identify several important reasons for involving communities. Community engagement builds trust and belonging, promotes shared responsibility, strengthens reintegration and self-worth, and can reduce stigma in local communities.
For young people, participation in useful and visible community actions can create small but important experiences of success. Completing a task, presenting an idea, receiving constructive feedback or working alongside residents can strengthen confidence and the sense that they have a legitimate place in the community.
For communities, direct cooperation can challenge assumptions. When residents and institutions see young people contributing to a positive activity, attention can gradually move from labels and stereotypes toward skills, effort and future potential.



6.4. Principles of Eff ective Engagement

The Y REACH training approach is built around five principles.

- Inclusion – every relevant voice matters and participation should not be limited to the most powerful organisations.
- Transparency – communication should be clear about aims, expectations, responsibilities and decision-making.
- Co-creation – community members and young people should be involved early in developing solutions.
- Empowerment – young people should have genuine leadership roles.
- Positive storytelling – communication should highlight constructive contributions and successful change.

These principles should guide every stage of the process. A community meeting, for example, should not merely collect attendance. Participants should understand why they are invited and how their contribution can influence the final activity.

6.5. Understanding the Local Context

Before launching a community action, youth workers should understand the local environment. The original training approach recommends community mapping as a practical exercise. Mapping helps identify actors who can support activities,

understand attitudes toward young people with offending backgrounds and recognise cultural differences.
The mapping process should examine both opportunities and barriers. Youth workers should ask which organisations are trusted, where young people already have positive contacts, which institutions can provide practical support and what concerns community members may have.
In the Y REACH context, this approach can be adapted to municipalities such as Kochani, Pazardzhik and Sainte-Anne, while respecting the specific social and cultural characteristics of each locality.
A useful mapping discussion can be organised around four questions:

1. Which local challenge could realistically be addressed through a youth-led action?
2. Who is affected by that challenge?
3. Who can contribute knowledge, resources, space, services or promotion?
4. What attitudes or concerns must be understood before implementation?

6.6. Stakeholder Mapping and Building Partnerships

The training presentations identify a broad range of possible stakeholders: local governments, city councils, youth workers, schools, NGOs, families, local businesses, police and media. The second training presentation emphasises that a general stakeholder map is only the starting point. Each proposed project may require additional, specific partners.
Partnership building should therefore move from a general list toward identifying high-impact partners for a particular project idea. Youth workers should define what each partner could contribute and what benefits or expected role the partnership may have.

- Municipalities may provide coordination, permissions, land, tools, materials, services or promotion.
- NGOs may contribute expertise, facilitation and links with communities.
- Schools and educational institutions may support participation and learning.
- Businesses may contribute materials, services, sponsorship or practical knowledge.
- Community leaders may help build trust and reach residents.
- Media can support positive visibility and public understanding.
- Families and residents can provide participation, feedback and local knowledge.

The objective is not simply to collect as many partners as possible. A smaller group of committed actors with clear roles can be more effective than a long list of organisations with no practical involvement.

6.7. The Role of Youth Workers as Active Mentors

The Y REACH organisational approach assigns three youth workers to mentor six young people in each municipality, with each youth worker acting as an Active Mentor to two young people. This structure is intended to provide close support while preserving youth ownership.
The key principle is: do not design for young people; design with them. The mentor facilitates, asks questions, supports preparation and helps young people understand feedback, but should not take ownership of their project.

Active Mentors can support young people in several practical areas:

- Identifying and defining a real community challenge.
- Generating several initial project ideas.
- Assessing whether an idea is realistic.
- Identifying potential partners.
- Preparing a budget and time schedule.
- Practising presentation and communication skills.
- Understanding stakeholder feedback.
- Supporting safe and responsible implementation.

The mentor should progressively encourage greater leadership. As confidence develops, young people should increasingly speak for themselves and make decisions about their project.

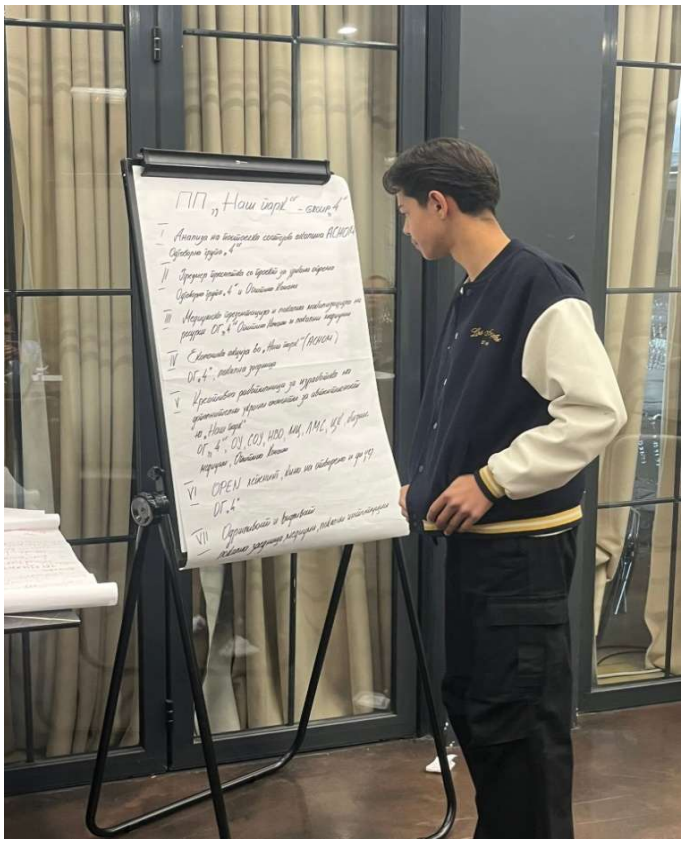
6.8. Co-Designing Community Actions with Young People

A strong community project begins with a real need. The training materials recommend developing at least three initial small-scale ideas with youth mentees. Each team should develop a distinct idea that addresses a genuine community need. An example used in the Community Engagement training is the “Green Hands” initiative. Young people and residents cleaned a green area and planted trees, transforming community service into community learning. The stated purpose was to improve trust and the public image of young people through visible cooperation.
The specific activity can vary, but the design process should remain youth-led. Young people should be able to explain:

5. What problem are we trying to address?
6. Why is this important for the local community?
7. Who should be involved?
8. What will young people do?
9. What resources are needed?
10. What change do we expect?

6.9. A Six-Phase Strategy for Community Engagement

The Building Community Partnerships training provides a practical sequence that can be used as the core operational model for community-engaging actions.



Phase 1 – Identify High-Impact Partners

Map key stakeholders and define a strategy for their involvement. Identify expected contributions and benefits. Then identify project-specific actors who can actively contribute to the proposed idea.

Phase 2 – Co-Design with Young People

Develop at least three initial ideas with youth mentees. Support idea scoping, budgeting and identification of partner roles. Young people should practise presenting their ideas.

Phase 3 – Stakeholder Workshop 1

Present initial ideas, listen to stakeholders and collect feedback. The purpose is consultation and refinement.

Phase 4 – Detailed Project Development

Use working sessions and design-thinking methods to turn initial ideas into detailed, realistic project plans with a Bill of Quantities and implementation schedule.

Phase 5 – Stakeholder Workshop 2

Organise a visible community selection event where teams present finalised ideas and a transparent process is used to select the strongest proposal.

Phase 6 – Implementation

Formalise practical partnerships, implement the selected activity safely, communicate results and involve young people in responsibility and tracking of progress.

6.10. Stakeholder Workshop 1: Consultation and Listening

The first stakeholder workshop is described as a promotional and listening phase. Its purpose is not to defend a finished project. Young people should present raw or early ideas and ask stakeholders what is missing, how the idea could be improved and how their organisations could contribute.
The training guidance recommends identifying and inviting at least 30 key stakeholders, including actors who are specifically relevant to the proposed ideas. This creates a broad consultation environment and increases the possibility of finding unexpected contributions.
Youth workers should prepare young people to listen actively. Not every suggestion must be accepted, but suggestions should not be dismissed without consideration. The aim is to help young people understand feedback and use it intelligently.
Suggested workshop structure:

11. Welcome and explanation of the purpose.
12. Introduction of young people and their positive project roles.
13. Presentation of initial project ideas by the youth teams.
14. Stakeholder questions and feedback.
15. Discussion of possible contributions and partnerships.
16. Collection and documentation of ideas.
17. Agreement on next steps.

6.11. Developing Detailed Small-Scale Projects

After the first consultation, youth teams should work with their Active Mentors to develop detailed proposals. The training materials recommend using design-thinking methodology during the working sessions.
Each detailed proposal should clearly describe planned activities and include a Bill of Quantities and a time schedule. The schedule should be realistic and should include time needed for any procurement procedures for materials or services.
A complete project proposal should normally contain:

- A clear description of the community need.
- Objectives and expected results.
- A description of activities.
- Roles of young people and community partners.
- A detailed list of materials, services and other planned costs.
- A realistic implementation timetable.
- A communication approach.
- Safety and supervision considerations.

Clarity is important because the proposal must be understandable to young people, partners and community members. A complicated plan that only the mentor understands is not genuinely youth-led.

6.12. Stakeholder Workshop 2: Community Selection

The second workshop is the selection event. It is intended to be highly visible and to give the community a role in choosing the best project idea. Each team presents its final plan, including budget, time schedule and partnership list.
The training materials recommend a transparent voting or selection system, such as blinded voting or a stakeholder jury. The original presentation proposes criteria based on community relevance, innovativeness and youth leadership.
A transparent process is essential. Community participation in selection strengthens ownership and acceptance of the chosen action. The community becomes involved before implementation rather than being asked to support a decision that has already been made.
Young people should be supported to present themselves, explain their ideas and answer questions. This presentation experience is itself an important capacity-building activity.

6.13. Practical Implementation and Partnership Formalisation

Once an idea is selected, the implementation phase begins. The training materials recommend a simple or “light” Memorandum of Understanding between the municipality and relevant partners. The purpose is to clarify practical responsibilities. The agreement can identify what the municipality or partners provide, such as land, tools, materials, services or promotion, and what young people contribute, such as labour, design or coordination. The agreed timeline should also be included and followed.



Three practical principles are emphasised:

- Buy Local whenever possible. Local purchasing can create additional community support and involvement.
- Transparency in spending. Young people should be involved in tracking expenditure as an opportunity to learn financial responsibility.
- Asset Focus. Where appropriate, resources should support lasting results, permanent structures or reusable tools.

Implementation should continue to involve community partners rather than treating them only as workshop participants. Regular contact and visible progress help maintain engagement.

6.14. Ethical Engagement, Privacy and Safety

Community involvement with young people who have offending backgrounds requires sensitivity. The training materials emphasise privacy, non-stigmatising language and supervision.

Privacy is essential. A young person's legal history should never be published. Public communication should instead focus on constructive project roles such as Project Leaders or Youth Ambassadors.

Language matters. Community meetings should avoid labels that define young people through past behaviour. The focus should remain on their participation, skills, responsibilities and contribution to the activity.

All activities must be appropriately supervised by youth workers. Risk assessments should be conducted for physical work, public events and other activities where safety considerations are relevant.

An ethical engagement checklist should therefore ask:

- Are personal data and privacy protected?
- Does communication avoid stigmatising labels?
- Are young people participating voluntarily and meaningfully?
- Are activities adequately supervised?
- Have relevant risks been considered?
- Does the activity focus on strengths and constructive roles?
- Does the approach support restorative and relationship-building principles?

6.15. Communication and Positive Storytelling

Communication should support engagement throughout the project, not only at the end. The Community Engagement training recommends open and respectful communication, use of local language and visuals, sharing results through photos and stories, and celebrating success through local media, social media and community events.

The Building Community Partnerships training strongly emphasises positive storytelling. Communication should highlight the hard work of young people, visible results and the community's welcoming response.

Useful approaches include:

- Before-and-after photographs of a community action.
- Short stories describing the process and positive results.
- Local television, radio, web portals and community media.
- Social media updates during implementation.
- Public events that celebrate completed work.
- Testimonials from partners and community members.

The human-interest dimension should focus on positive change and cooperation. Communication should never expose private legal histories or create sensational stories around young people's past.

6.16. Motivating Young People and Building Ownership

Motivation is strengthened when young people experience ownership and see that their actions matter. The Community Engagement training highlights several practical approaches: build trust through small wins, give a sense of ownership, recognise contributions and use youth workers as Active Mentors.
Small successes are particularly important. A successful meeting, a positive presentation, agreement from a partner or completion of a practical task can build confidence for more demanding responsibilities.
Role-play can also help young people prepare for difficult conversations. One exercise proposed in the training is talking to a sceptical community member. This can help young people practise calm communication, explain their project and respond constructively to concerns.
Recognition should be meaningful. Community acknowledgement, positive feedback and visible celebration of completed work can reinforce the message that young people are capable of contributing positively.

6.17. Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring should track both participation and change. The Community Engagement training identifies practical indicators including the number of community partners involved in planned local workshops, participation rates in small-scale projects, attitude change through pre- and post-assessment and continuation after the project.
The Building Community Partnerships training identifies four key areas:

- Stakeholder Participation – how many partners remain involved from the first workshop to the end.
- Youth Ownership – whether young people take more leadership as the process develops.
- Attitude Change – whether pre- and post-assessments indicate reduced stigma.
- Sustainability – whether partnerships continue after project completion.

Practical monitoring tools can include participant lists, online surveys, photographs, testimonials and structured reflection. Monitoring should not become an administrative burden; it should provide useful evidence for improving activities and understanding whether engagement is genuinely working.

6.18. Sustainability and Continuation

The final objective is not simply to complete one small-scale activity. The Y REACH approach seeks to build relationships that can continue. Sustainability depends on whether partners remain connected, whether young people retain positive roles and whether the community sees value in continuing cooperation.
A sustainability discussion should begin before the final event. Partners can consider which activities, relationships or practices can continue with available local resources.
Possible sustainability questions include:
18. Which partners want to continue cooperation?
19. Can the activity be repeated or adapted?
20. Can young people continue as ambassadors or volunteers?
21. Which tools, structures or resources remain available?
22. What lessons should be transferred to future youth initiatives?

A community partnership is more sustainable when it is based on mutual benefit and clear relationships rather than only on temporary project funding.

6.19. Practical Tools and Templates

A. Stakeholder Mapping Sheet

Project idea: _____
Community need: _____
Stakeholder: _____
Why is this stakeholder relevant? _____
Possible contribution: _____
Expected benefit/role: _____
Contact and follow-up action: _____

B. Mini-Project Design Worksheet

1. Community challenge
2. Project goal
3. Planned activities
4. Young people's leadership role
5. Community partners
6. Required resources
7. Expected impact
8. Communication plan
9. Timeline
10. Safety considerations

C. Ethical Engagement Checklist

Before implementation, confirm privacy protection, non-stigmatising communication, adequate supervision, risk assessment, clear responsibilities and meaningful youth participation.

D. Communication Plan Template

Audience: _____
Main message: _____
Communication channel: _____
Responsible person/team: _____
Timing: _____
Privacy considerations: _____

E. Workshop Reflection Questions

- What did community members find most relevant?
- What feedback improved our idea?
- What new partners emerged?
- Did young people lead the discussion?
- What should we change before the next phase?



6.20. Final Recommendations

Successful community engagement should be gradual, practical and relationship-based. Youth workers should begin with listening and mapping, support young people to develop their own ideas, invite the community into consultation and decision-making, and maintain cooperation during implementation.

The most important strategic message of this manual is that young people should not be positioned as passive recipients of help. They should be supported to become visible contributors to their communities. Youth workers act as bridges between young people and local actors, while community partners create opportunities for trust and participation.

The Y REACH training materials express this approach through the idea of joint engagement: partnership, trust and purpose. Small steps can produce meaningful change when they create positive experiences that can be repeated and strengthened over time.

Community involvement is therefore not an additional component of reintegration. It is one of the practical environments in which reintegration can take place.

Key Message

“The strength of a community is measured by how it treats its most vulnerable members.”

Closing Message

Supporting young people at risk is both a challenge and a privilege. Every interaction, conversation, and opportunity for guidance has the potential to influence a young person's future. Throughout this guideline, we have explored how neuroscience, restorative justice, life and work skills development, art therapy, and community engagement can be combined to create holistic, evidence-based approaches that promote reintegration, resilience, and positive development.

Youth workers are not expected to solve every problem or replace therapeutic, educational, or judicial services. Their unique role is to build trusting relationships, create safe and predictable environments, encourage personal responsibility, and empower young people to recognize their strengths and opportunities for change. Small, consistent actions—listening without judgment, providing structure, encouraging participation, and fostering hope—can have a lasting impact on a young person's life.

Reintegration is not a single event but a continuous process that requires collaboration among young people, families, professionals, institutions, and communities. Sustainable change becomes possible when support is coordinated, inclusive, and centred on the dignity, rights, and potential of every individual.

Restorative and trauma-informed approaches remind us that accountability and compassion are not opposing values; together, they create the conditions for meaningful growth and lasting reintegration.

The **Y REACH** project demonstrates the importance of cross-disciplinary cooperation and international partnership in addressing the complex realities faced by vulnerable adolescents. By sharing knowledge, practical tools, and successful practices, we strengthen the capacity of youth workers across Europe to respond with confidence, professionalism, and empathy.

As you apply the ideas and methods presented in this guideline, remember that meaningful change begins with relationships built on trust, respect, and consistency. Every young person deserves the opportunity to learn, to repair, to belong, and to build a positive future. Your commitment, patience, and belief in their potential can become the foundation for that journey.

Together, we can help young people move beyond past difficulties, discover their strengths, and become active, responsible, and valued members of their communities.

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