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TEACHING PARENTS KEY TO MANAGING YOUNG OFFENDERS

Working with families will help break the cycle of anti-social behaviour

KEVIN RONAN

RECENT coverage in *The Australian* has identified a number of problems related to youth offending and our juvenile justice system. Understandably, higher-cost juvenile detention appeals to a community need to penalise youth for bad behaviour as well as to protect the community. However, a lock-em-up strategy tends to produce only a short-term outcome that is further complicated by a tendency for increased recidivism.

This is unfortunate given that youth offending is often a reflection of a recurrent, multi-generational problem. Of differing pathways to offending, one prominent pathway discussed by Northern Territory chief magistrate Hilary Hannam is through a history of being abused. That is, child abuse is a risk factor for a range of poor outcomes, including offending.

> Our program helps them learn how to discipline

Two prominent features linked to child maltreatment and the generational transmission of the cycle of violence are coercive forms of discipline and poor-quality parent-child relationships, including a lack of warmth and affection. These factors are seeds for various forms of abuse and neglect. Related to ineffective discipline and maltreatment is another prominent risk factor — lack of parental monitoring and supervision. Not knowing, or caring, where the kids are perhaps when drinking or at other times has been found to be linked to what is often the single most powerful predictor of violent, antisocial outcomes for youth, associating with other kids who have come from similar backgrounds and who are also on an antisocial trajectory.

Collectively, these factors are what our family-based treatment program for antisocial behaviour refers to as the Big Four risk factors. As prominent researcher Thomas Dishion has put it, coercive parenting can lead to "antisocial friendships (that) provide another context within which to practice coercion".

Thus, when asking the question of how best to address the cycle of violence, the answer that research has come up with in the past 20 years starts with families, with parents or other important adults as a crucial link. But caregivers in these families themselves can have quite significant problems. These include socio-economic disadvantage, unemployment, marginalisation, substance abuse and dependence, mental health difficulties, favourable attitudes to antisocial practices and criminal behaviour. Families with these problems also tend not to engage with services readily. If they do, they tend to have a number of obstacles of the sort just mentioned that stand in the way of successful outcomes.

Thus, models of intervention have been designed to train and support staff to deliver strategies that reduce obstacles for "hard-to-reach" families, and deliver additional strategies aimed at the risk factors linked to the cycle of violence.

Programs like this overseas and in this country have been shown to work. Recent evidence from a randomised controlled trial of one of these approaches, our family-based intervention program for antisocial behaviour and offending in youth here in Queensland, shows promising outcomes. Now in its fourth year, it focuses on the Big Four risk factors and includes the idea that families have strengths that can be enhanced through a variety of strategies such as helping parents to monitor and discipline children in firm but also fair and appropriate ways.

When faced with significant acting up by a child, parents and caregivers typically will either use a coercive strategy, including verbal and physical maltreatment, or they will simply give in for peace and quiet.

Our program helps them learn how to discipline in a way that monitors and draws the line firmly but within a supportive parent-child relationship. Outcomes in our trial include improvements in child, parent and family functioning and reduced long-term problems, including significantly lower arrest rates for the youth over time, including up to two years following treatment. Our program also works with other adults — such as grandparents — to supplement work with parents or in the event of parents not being available or equipped.

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When I was training 25 years ago, the overall outlook for treating these youth was quite pessimistic. Thus, it is heartening to report now that we have the knowledge about how to treat the risk factors linked to child maltreatment, the cycle of violence and problematic outcomes. A major task now is to emphasise a preventive and rehabilitative focus. Helping parents to provide firm discipline, in the context of a supportive parent-child relationship versus the system of doling out correctional forms of discipline is one key. There are other elements, including the critical need for education and vocational training. However, at a larger level, we need support from the community, including the government: going down this path is not a short-term solution — it will involve sustained effort over many years.

As the former head of a 24-bed secure residential facility, I have no doubt that secure forms of intervention, including detention, will continue to play a role in juvenile justice. However, a shift to a rehabilitative focus is possible, although it will require long-term resolve from government.

Rehabilitation requires sustained effort and needs ongoing bipartisan support as governments change over time. Importantly, it also requires support in communities. What we now need is the will and the targeted resources necessary to translate knowledge into effective preventive and rehabilitative services.

Kevin Ronan is foundation professor and chair in clinical psychology at CQUniversity. He has worked with maltreated, violent and antisocial youth and families for more than 25 years, including as the facility director of a large state program in the US.