

## Article 4

# What Works for Young Persons in Custody: Seven Characteristics of Effective Rehabilitation Programmes



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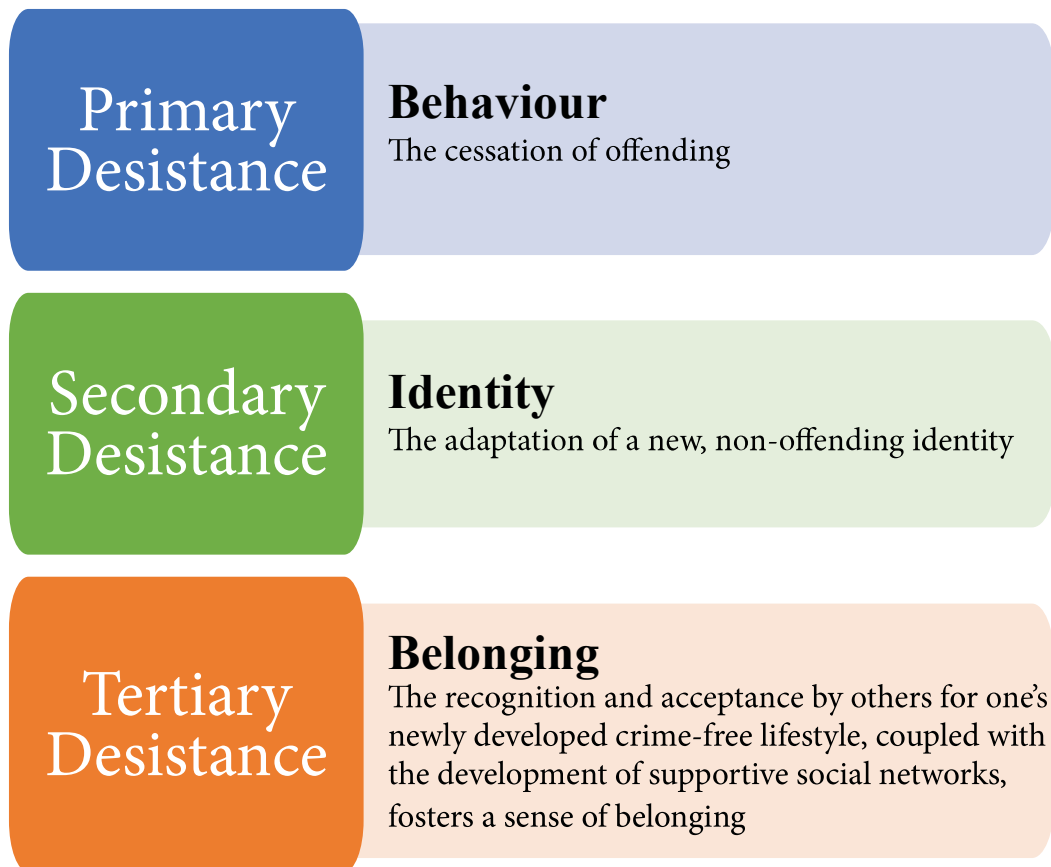
Young people are our future. “Hong Kong will prosper only when its young people thrive”. Regarding helping young persons in custody (PICs) desist from crime and unleash their full potential, the following passages summarise the seven key evidence-based characteristics of effective youth rehabilitation programmes drawn from a systematic review of 44 studies across 41 jurisdictions (Pooley, 2020) and the meta reviews synthesising meta-analyses with quantitative effect sizes (Farrington, Gaffney & White, 2022; Papas & Dent, 2021). These characteristics serve as the indispensable guideposts to design, deliver and implement programmes for local young PICs.

### **1. Why is Programme Theory Important?**

A rehabilitation programme grounded in a robust theory of change and supported by evidence-based change mechanisms that explain how to achieve the intended outcome can significantly reduce re-offending rates. *Cognitive-behavioural programmes*, which drill *stop-and-think skills to identify and modify distorted criminal attitudes leading to criminal behaviour*, have proved to contribute to a 27-35% reduction in youth re-offending. Conversely, research has consistently indicated that purely punitive interventions do not yield positive outcomes, and shock incarceration even associates with a non-significant 3-5% increase in re-offending. There is theoretical consensus that punitive, fear-arousing interventions do not deter or bring behavioural changes. Nevertheless, the boot camp military regime, when combined with rehabilitation programmes or counselling, was effective in reducing re-offending over a ten-year period with a benefit-to-cost ratio of 3.9 to 1.

## 2. What is the Latest Theory of Change in Offender Rehabilitation?

*Desistance theories* (Maruna & Farrall, 2004; McNeill, 2014) which explain *the process of ceasing criminal or antisocial behaviour over an extended period of time*, have emerged as a predominant framework in contemporary correctional literature. By adopting a broader, holistic perspective and leveraging an individual's strengths and potential for sustainable personal transformation, desistance theories go beyond the traditional risk-needs-responsivity approach in offender rehabilitation. The gradual and ongoing process in long-term desistance as illustrated by the "success stories" of desisters encompasses the following three key dimensions:



*Figure 1. Three key dimensions of desistance from crime*

### 3. Who, What and How to Treat?

There was a significant difference in the re-offending rate of 17% among juvenile offenders who have participated in interventions compared to those who have not. The most substantial reductions were observed in sexual offenders, followed by serious or violent offenders, general offenders, non-serious offenders and drug offenders. Programmes adhering to the globally recognised ***Risk-Needs-Responsivity model of offender rehabilitation*** (Bonta & Andrews, 2017) implement the following objective and replicable principles to effectively reduce re-offending:

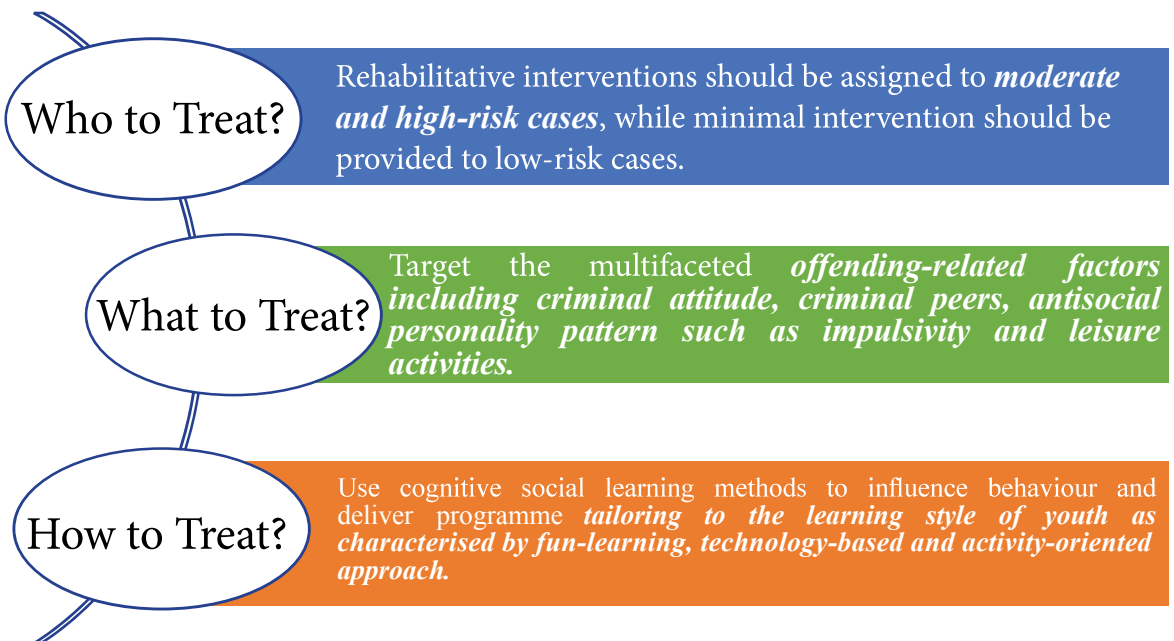


Figure 2. Risk-Need-Responsivity principles of effective offender rehabilitation

#### **4. What Should the Staff-Youth Relationship Entail?**

A positive and collaborative professional working alliance between the programme staff and the young PICs is essential for programme effectiveness, which enhances the likelihood to reduce re-offending, improves responsiveness to the programme and increases programme completion rates. An *encouraging, open and non-judgemental relationship in which the youth feel that the programme and correctional staff believe in them, empathise with them and recognise their strengths* is crucial. On the contrary, the youth are less likely to engage in the rehabilitation programme if the staff do not respect them, focus on their failures and apply undue pressure.

#### **5. Does Parent Training Help?**

Family-based treatment, Multi-Systematic Therapy (Henggeler & Schaeffer, 2016) and Functional Family Therapy (Sexton & James, 2002) contribute to an 18-25% reduction in delinquency and a 31-40% decrease in adolescent problem behaviour. These family-based interventions provide *services to families and/or the youth to address the risk and protective factors associated with offending behaviours as well as parent training on positive communication, effective parenting and conflict resolution skills to improve family functioning*. Of note, effective parenting must be timely and developmentally appropriate. Parenting adolescents requires the provision of adequate opportunities for identity development while parenting young adults should allow room for independent decision-making.

#### **6. How Important is Multi-Disciplinary, Multi-Agency Throughcare?**

Given the multi-faceted needs of young PICs, it is crucial to providing them with opportunities for a wide range of services, including education, job skills training, mental health services and wilderness therapy, to help build a more positive future. Co-ordinated efforts to ensure the young PICs receive comprehensive support that is tailored to their needs from various agencies and disciplines both within institutions and upon return to the community are essential. Effective co-ordination should facilitate proper sharing of information, resources and values across different disciplines and agencies.

## 7. What is the Role of Programme Evaluation?

Research indicates that well-planned, ongoing evaluation mechanisms contribute to enhanced programme effectiveness, provide valuable information for continuous programme development or refinement as well as support adaptation to the changing needs of stakeholders and the evolving conditions within which the programme operates. While the *re-offending rate* is often perceived as the benchmark for evaluating offender programmes, other measures such as *programme completion, readiness to change, psychological and behavioural changes, education, employment, relationships and prosocial engagements* serve as more sensitive and comprehensive indicators of the progress of young offenders on their desistance journey.



### *Update on Youth Psychological Services: Hong Kong Correctional Services*

In Youth Lab, the continuous refinement of youth psychological services aims to help young PICs cultivate a prosocial lifestyle and become thriving individuals. The **core PREP programme adopting a cognitive-behavioural**

**approach** has its major focus on identifying and rectifying distorted criminal attitudes. Local research evidence demonstrates that criminal attitude-based intervention significantly reduced criminal attitudes which in turn lowered the likelihood of re-offending (Leung, Hung, Chan & Kwong, 2019). **The new initiative, “MindSport”, adopts a strength-based desistance perspective by integrating character strength intervention into sports activities** conducted by a partnering non-governmental organisation. Clinical psychologists guide young PICs to recognise and utilise character strengths such as perseverance and teamwork during bodyweight training and in daily life. During recent staff training at Sha Tsui Correctional Institution (STCI), **correctional staff shared their vision for the personal growth of young PICs, use of encouragement, active listening, instilling hope in daily interactions, as well as their job satisfaction from witnessing improved family relationships and positive changes among young PICs.**



# *Insights*

## **1. Characteristics of Effective Youth Programmes**

Youth programmes grounded in cognitive-behavioural therapy and desistance theories, which incorporate throughcare from institution to community, allocate resources according to the risk-needs-responsivity model, and ensure robust multi-disciplinary and multi-agency coordination, have proved to be effective in reducing re-offending.

## **2. Encouraging, Open and Non-judgmental Relationship**

A key element is to foster an encouraging, open and non-judgemental relationship in which the youth feel that the programme and correctional staff believe in them, empathise with them and recognise their strengths.

## **3. Importance of Family-based Interventions**

Family-based interventions should address the risk and protective factors associated with offending behaviours, and focus on training parents in positive communication, effective parenting and conflict resolution skills to improve family functioning.

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