

MESSAGE GUIDE: YOUTH JUSTICE



Evidence-based tips to help us build more
constructive conversations about
our young people.

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Background

This document is designed to help you respond to media questions and talk about youth justice in a way that helps to generate constructive conversations, rather than trigger the same old myths and arguments.

It is mainly based on research conducted in the US and is a guide only. Feel free to pick and choose the bits that make sense to you.

Reference: <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/toolkit/shifting-gears-on-juvenile-justice/>



Useful 4-step structure for effective framing:

1. Start with shared **values**
2. Explain the **problem** (show the context, shift the blame away from individuals, use metaphors)
3. Show **solutions** and tell stories about what works
4. End with a shared **vision**.

Before we start...

WHAT IS THE STORY THAT WE WANT TO TELL?

- ✓ *Context matters (supports for families, communities etc)*
- ✓ *Adolescent brains are still developing (i.e. the focus should be on supporting development to improve outcomes)*
- ✓ *Changing the path for young people is possible and is good for everyone*
- ✓ *We need evidence-based programs and policies designed to improve youth and social outcomes*
- ✓ *It is possible to change the way society does things (i.e. the justice system is a system that we built - so it can be remodelled if it's not working)*

UNHELPFUL BELIEFS THAT WE'RE UP AGAINST...

- ✗ NOT helpful to believe in individualism (i.e. that some people are just 'bad eggs'.)
- ✗ NOT helpful to believe that young people are fully developed and that adult legal responses are effective (i.e. there is lack of understanding about brain development)
- ✗ NOT helpful to believe that crime is a rational decision (i.e. that harder punishments are the only way to decrease crime)
- ✗ NOT helpful to believe in fatalism (i.e. that crime is inevitable and that there's nothing we can do to get young people back on track)

NOTE: It is NOT helpful to simply rebut these beliefs. By repeating them, we risk reinforcing them. Instead, we need to tell a new, more constructive, story.

How do we tell this story?

The following provides an example of how we might tell a more positive 'core story' about adolescent development in the NT, using a 4-step structure for effective framing:

Use fairness and common-sense values:

1. START WITH SHARED VALUES

We all want a Northern Territory that treats every young person - in every community - fairly and supports them according to their needs. Building safe supportive communities is good for all of us and helps all our young people to get on a path to healthy, productive lives.

Nowadays, people commonly understand that what happens in children's earliest years has long-lasting implications; that things - like health care, education, supportive relationships, and nutrition - all help to build strong foundations for life.

2. EXPLAIN THE PROBLEM

However, what many don't know is that adolescence is a similarly critical phase, a time when the brain is developing the skills that we all need to navigate adulthood.

Here's the problem: our youth justice system is still treating too many of our young people like adults, and that doesn't make sense.

Use a metaphor to explain how juvenile justice systems need to change (see below)

In the long term, that's bad for these young people, and it's also bad for the NT - we lose out on the contributions that healthy, functioning adults provide to families, communities, and the workforce.

3. SHOW SOLUTIONS AND TELL STORIES OF EFFICACY

Instead, we can achieve better outcomes by supporting children, young people and their families - through diversion programs, mental health treatment, and other interventions - practices that are both feasible and in line with our modern understanding of adolescent development.

Add examples of how this is working i.e. stories of efficacy

4. END WITH A SHARED VISION

When we invest in young people's long-term outcomes we can create safer, healthier communities now and into the future.

Using metaphors:

Here are some frames (metaphors) that may help to shift the conversation around youth justice to be more productive.

Resilience scale metaphor

As children and adolescents develop, positive or negative factors in their experiences, relationships, and skill-building opportunities stack up like weights on a scale, tipping their development in one direction or the other.

Supportive relationships, safe and healthy environments and communities, and plenty of opportunities to develop strong cognitive, social, and emotional skills tip the scale positively; negative factors like violence, chronic trauma, neglect, or malnutrition do the opposite.



Removing young people from school and sending them into the criminal justice system is an especially heavy negative weight; counteracting it with positive factors is difficult, so it's best to not put that weight on their scales to begin with.

Instead, diversion programs, in-school counseling and behavioral therapies, and similar programs are ways to help the scale tip positively.

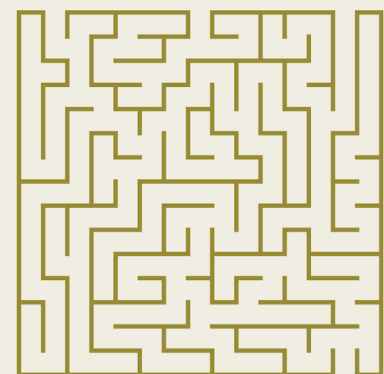
We need to recognise adolescents' developmental needs and address their circumstances and behaviors in ways that do not stack the odds against them.

Let's invest in ways to tip the scale in the right direction for every young person in every community.

Maze metaphor

Even the most difficult mazes include exits. But our current youth justice system is designed like a maze with too many paths in and too few paths out. Too many young people, no matter where they enter the system, end up on a path leading straight to detention, with no way out.

Alternative paths that improve youth outcomes must be created: for example, there must be multiple routes to mental health and addiction services and programs appropriate for adolescents - who are in a period of rapid brain development - so that they can get back on track to live healthy, productive lives.



Attention must also be paid to the policies and programs that can divert young people from entering the maze in the first place: community development, well-functioning schools, safe neighbourhoods, and well-supported families.

By redesigning the justice maze, we can limit the number of entry points and maximize opportunities for young people to access the services they need in order to be functioning members of our communities.

Gear metaphor

Most people understand that a bicycle stuck in one gear isn't going to get anyone very far.

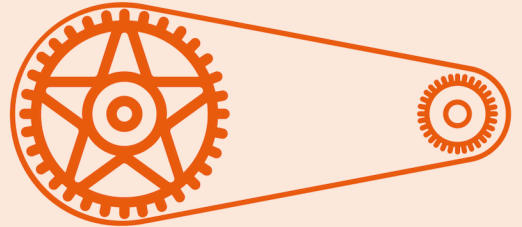
Our criminal justice system right now is just like that - stuck, because it's using detention as the main response to situations that call for another gear.

For low-level offenders, for children and adolescents whose brains are still developing, for people in need of mental health or addiction services, prison is the wrong gear.

It doesn't move them - or our society - forward.

For young people, it can derail their progress at a critical time in their brain development, with long-term implications.

Instead of using one gear no matter what the terrain, our system must be flexible, with appropriate responses to different situations and circumstances, so that we can achieve better outcomes and see real progress.






FIND THE FACTS

The current situation:

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/health-welfare-services/youth-justice/overview>
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/youth-detention-population-in-australia-2021/contents/summary>

FIND STORIES OF WHAT WORKS

A lot is known about what works in youth justice. A great place to learn more is the Justice Reform Initiative 'Alternatives to Incarceration in the NT' report.



This guide has been developed under the auspices of the Northern Territory Prevention Alliance (NTPA).

The NTPA is an independent, high level leadership group that emphasises the collective role that different sectors, communities and individuals play in keeping children and young people in the Northern Territory safe, and ensuring they have the opportunities they need to reach their full potential. It aims to maximise opportunities for NT-wide action.

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