



HM Inspectorate
of Probation

An evidence-informed model and guide for effective relational working in youth justice

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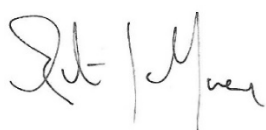
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Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth justice services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth justice services.

This report was kindly produced by Dr Eóin O'Meara Daly, Jackie Dwane, Caitlin Lewis and Professor Seán Redmond, presenting findings from a three-year top-down/bottom-up action research project undertaken in Ireland which examined effective relationship building between youth justice practitioners and crime-involved young people. Relational practice is at the heart of youth justice work, and the project has led to the co-creation of a Relationship Model (and accompanying guidance) which can be used as a reflective resource by practitioners and their managers. The model includes: (i) a base layer of creating safety; (ii) a core layer of 'trust, time, support and being young person centred'; and (iii) seven grouped skills, attributes, and methods that can be applied at various points – these are approaches which encourage practitioners to 'be fully committed, communicate with empathy, make connections and advocate, be flexible, practice use of self and reflection, be honest and challenge constructively' and finally, 'guide, inspire hope and build agency'. The model does not attempt to account for every eventuality, recognising that relationships by their nature are dynamic and diverse, but crucially it does provide evidence-informed signposts and pointers for youth justice practitioners to follow when trying to build successful and effective relationships.



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The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation

1. Introduction

What does it mean for youth justice practitioners to examine their own relational practice with young people and consciously adapt their approach according to available evidence? This paper presents empirical findings from a project undertaken in Ireland that examined effective relationship building through complimentary processes of a systematic review of evidence, practice reflection, and action research – the latter has been described as a systematic collaborative approach where researchers and practitioners both conduct research and take action to simultaneously investigate and address an issue (Mac Naughton, 2001).

The project was undertaken in collaboration with 60 youth justice practitioners from 16 Youth Diversion Project (YDP) case study sites across Ireland. YDPs are community-based focussed youth interventions that address offending behaviour with targeted young people to divert them from further involvement in crime (Reddy and Redmond, 2022). The 16 case study sites represent a purposive sample of 100 projects managed by over 30 youth organisations.

Youth justice work in Ireland emphasises non-custodial alternatives to detention for young people who offend (Hamilton, 2023). These alternatives include community-based diversion, intervention and prevention strategies, and/or programmes that focus on addressing risk and need (Convery and Seymour, 2016). Youth justice practitioners are frontline workers trained in youth work, social care or similar disciplines who engage with referred young people to help reduce their offending behaviour. Building relationships with young people for crime diversion purposes accounts for a substantial proportion of youth justice practitioners' time and taxpayers' investment in Ireland. It has been argued that without the relationship between the youth justice practitioner and the young person, there is no intervention (DCYA, 2014).

However, little is known about what constitutes effective relationship building in youth justice (Fullerton et al., 2021). As a result, policymakers and practitioners have not been able to fully understand the extent to which relationships can help divert young people from crime. In 2021, as a first step in understanding the 'black box' of relational practice, the Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice (REPPP) project in the School of Law, University of Limerick, published a systematic evidence review to present the international evidence regarding the development of effective relationships for youth crime diversion (Fullerton et al., 2021). The findings provided a summary of evidence relating to building and maintaining effective relationships between professionals and young people in youth justice settings. The review proposes that 'the core skills involved in developing effective working relationships with young people include active listening, taking the time to get to know the young person, empathetic responding, advising, guiding, modelling pro-social behaviours and challenging ideas and behaviours in a non-threatening or judgemental manner' (Fullerton et al., 2021, p. 8).

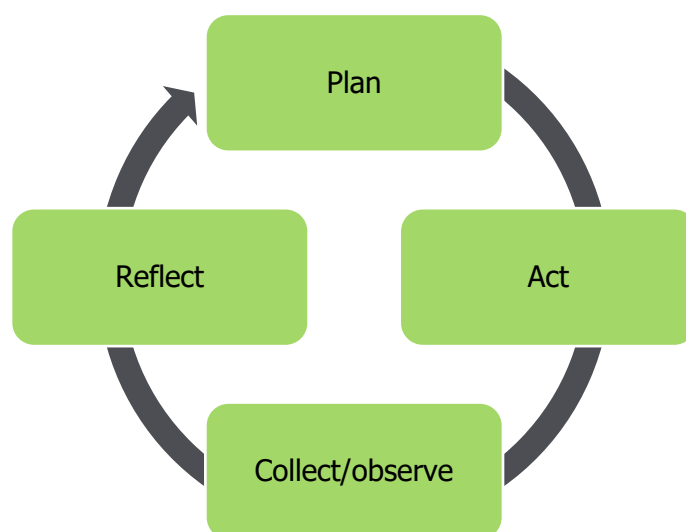
The next step, and the substance of this paper, was to learn from youth justice practitioners working at the frontline with young people. Action research was used to more closely examine existing relational practice and then develop a new evidence-informed model and guidance. The new model is informed by international evidence from the systematic evidence review and a substantial reservoir of tacit knowledge shared by youth justice practitioners.

2. What can youth justice practitioners do to build effective relationships?

The action research project documented important aspects of frontline youth justice practitioner knowledge and experience. This 'practice wisdom' was key to understanding how to build effective relationships that can divert young people from crime. The following sections describe the process and findings together with a discussion of the research.

2.1 The action research project

Stringer et al. (2004) outline four key steps in action research:



These steps inform iterations whereby changes to a programme or intervention are systematically documented and used to update further action implemented in 'real time' by practitioners working in the field (Orr, 2018). The action research process sought to identify the most salient features or elements of effective relationships as well as the skills, attributes, and methods that help youth justice practitioners to build them. To identify these most salient features, a collaborative co-creation model of action research was applied. Co-creation is a collaborative design process which can be particularly valuable when engaging with complex challenges (Aitken and Shackleton, 2014). In practice this meant working directly with youth justice practitioners from 16 YDP sites in different parts of Ireland. Accounts of relational practice were recorded to better understand what was working with young people and how this related to features of relationship building.

The YDPs were purposely selected by the Department of Justice and REPPP. The sample represented a reasonable mix of youth organisations¹ and different sizes of catchment area, with urban and rural contexts. YDP sites selected for the action research project committed to the research as project champions; 'individuals who dedicate themselves to supporting, marketing, and driving through an implementation, overcoming indifference or resistance that the intervention may provoke in an organization' (Powell, 2015, p.9).

¹ Youth organisations in Ireland which have service agreements with the Department of Justice for the delivery of YDPs have a variety of governance models ranging from vertically-integrated national organisations to small services managed by a local management committee.

From the beginning, the research team developed a 'trust contract' with the projects involved. One practical feature of early trust-building was for the research team to bound the commitment required from each project to engage with the research. Practitioners and their managers indicated how much time *they* were prepared to spend on the research project. It was agreed that each practitioner involved would spend no more than five percent of their weekly workload on the research. The purpose of the agreement, which was monitored throughout the study, was to provide reasonable assurances about the time youth justice practitioners would dedicate to the research and provide those involved with greater certainty about how this would impact their overall workload. Other features included the idea of mutual intent or being open and honest in reflections about encouraging behavioural change and circumstantial improvements for young people.

The systematic evidence review provided evidence of the key features of effective relationships in youth justice and several other settings, including counselling, psychotherapy, and social work. In addition, practitioners (n=24) representing each site were interviewed and asked to critically examine their own practice experiences of building and maintaining effective relationships with crime-involved young people. The interviews were semi-structured and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to generate thematic findings.

The interviews provided an insight into how a reasonably representative sample of youth justice practitioners in Ireland perceived and experienced the characteristics of effective relationship building. The findings developed from interviews with practitioners were synthesised with the evidence from the systematic review (Fullerton et al., 2021). These sources helped inform a 'top-down' [research-led] and 'bottom-up' [practitioner tacit knowledge] combined practice guidance prototype co-created by practitioners and researchers. The research team and practitioners then proceeded through the following stages of the action research cycle (see also Figure 1):

Ideate: researchers and practitioners² reviewed the draft of combined findings from the Fullerton et al. (2021) review, and 24 interviews with practitioners. Practitioners generated ideas recorded on flipcharts on how to apply the combined findings in their practice.

Co-design: the feedback was assessed by the research team and initial draft guidance on how to build effective relationships was developed. The output of this process was shared with participating practitioners inviting further observations to inform the model. Prototype practice guidance was then prepared for testing in the 16 participating YDPs.

Try out: in workshops, practitioners were asked to plan how their individual projects would implement the draft practice guidance. All projects in the trial then used the plans to test the draft guidance with young people in their local area. The trial lasted nine months (January to September 2020).³ Each project documented the process of early testing and shared this with the research team via feedback templates.

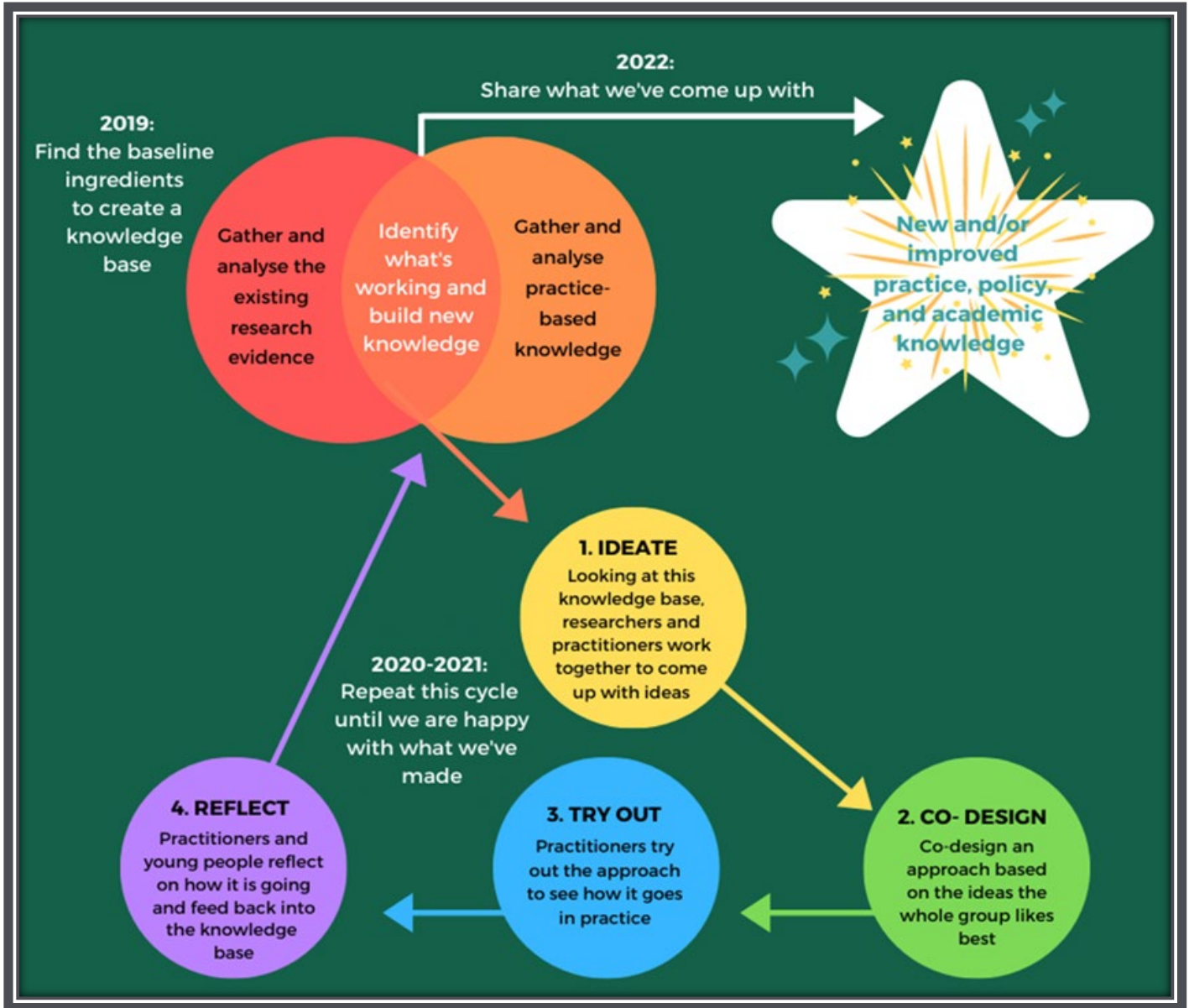
Reflect: 32 individual project meetings were facilitated by the research team (each project participated in two meetings). Each project reflected on the experiences of applying the different approaches. The research team reviewed the feedback from the teams and prepared a second draft of the practice guidance complete with an overarching practice model (see findings section). The practice model was shared again with the practitioners in the trial projects. In a second trial over nine months (November to July 2022), the projects tested the

² Forty-eight practitioners attended a workshop that was held in the University of Limerick.

³ The trial process was impacted by the Covid-19 restrictions as many youth justice workers changed their approach to a focus on outdoor contact.

complete practice model and guidance. The research team received feedback on the progress of the second trial from each project via a further round of online meetings (n=32). The team then reviewed and refined the model and guidance, and larger regional online workshops (n=3) were held to finalise the cycle of action research.

Figure 1: The project’s action research cycle



In the next section, the findings from this process are presented.

2.2 Key findings and the Relationship Model

The YDP Relationship Model at Figure 2 is a visual depiction of the approaches that practitioners described, referred to by many of those involved in the research as 'the relationship journey'.

Figure 2: The YDP Relationship Model



Three foundational concepts were described by practitioners as central to the efforts of building effective relationships. These concepts are represented in the model as the base and core layers.

1. Creating a safe culture.
2. Building trust, giving time, and support.
3. Being young person centred.

Practitioners also identified seven characteristics they associated with effective relationship building (see Table 1). These seven characteristics encompass individual skills, attributes, and methods that practitioners can apply in their face-to-face contact with young people.

Table 1: Seven characteristics of effective relationship building

Characteristics		Description
1.	<i>Being fully committed</i>	Practitioners are dependable and will not give up on the young person.
2.	<i>Communicating with empathy</i>	Active listening and practitioners' choice of words are important.
3.	<i>Making connections and advocating for young people</i>	A 'wraparound effect' supports the young person and provides them with a voice if needed.
4.	<i>Being flexible</i>	Being able to adapt to needs at a given time – adapting programmes, interventions and meeting schedules for example.
5.	<i>Reflecting and using themselves or their own experiences</i>	Self-awareness and using 'personality' or life experiences in a controlled safe way to connect with a young person.
6.	<i>Being honest and challenging constructively</i>	Being honest, genuine and supportive comes with constructive and safe challenging.
7.	<i>Guiding, inspiring hope, and building agency</i>	The relationship is a vehicle for the young person's development. Practitioners give a clear message that change is possible.

Relationship building – an artistic analogy

To build understanding of 'the relationship journey' depicted in the model, readers are invited to consider layers of a painting that build up with each brush stroke. The grey base layer, to 'create safety', acts as the foundation or undercoat, which all the other elements are built upon. This grey base layer also points north, which depicts the direction of intervention towards the agreed policy objective, to divert young people from crime and anti-social behaviour.

The core layer of the relationship journey is presented as a deep blue colour at the centre of the model. The core layer of 'trust, time, support and being young person centred' describes the elements in a functioning positive relationship between a young person and practitioner. Building trust, giving time and support were described by practitioners as fundamental practices that propel the relationship forward.

There are seven grouped skills, attributes, and methods that can progress each unique relationship with a young person. These are approaches that can be applied at various points on the relationship journey. These approaches encourage practitioners to 'be fully committed, communicate with empathy, make connections and advocate, be flexible, practice use of self and reflection, be honest and challenge constructively' and finally, 'guide, inspire hope and build agency' (as described in Table 1).

Beginning with the foundational approaches, and then applying the combined layers throughout the relationship journey aims to improve outcomes for young people. However, it must also be acknowledged that practitioners can encounter unknowns and face setbacks along the way. To aid practitioners, the model should be considered as a practice compass for each individual relationship journey with a small number of memorable guidance pointers, rather than a myriad of manualised instructions. The compass can point practitioners 'north', while

recognising that every relationship differs. Practitioners are incentivised to find their own way when developing the relationship with each individual young person, using the model and guidance as an accompanying resource and the overall mission as a practice boundary. This approach recognises that relationships by their nature are organic and that every relationship is necessarily agile and operating in environments that can be unpredictable.

The detailed guidance demonstrating the synthesis of the review and practice wisdom, complete with practitioner accounts and case examples, are included in the upcoming report for the Department of Justice in Ireland (O'Meara Daly et al., In progress).

2.3 Discussion and next steps

The action research project was deliberately focussed on modelling effective relationships rather than highlighting ineffective or bad relationships. While this may be considered uncritical, it was a conscious strategy to build confidence in practitioner-led design and the cultivation of new creative ideas. The corollary is that the propositions presented in the model are still part-tested albeit with a significant theoretical evidence base, requiring further testing as it is scaled out.

Practitioners argue that conscious and deliberate methods for reflection on relationships should be created in youth justice projects. Structured reflection on relationship building can improve practice, supporting practitioners to think more deeply about the purpose of the relationships they are building with young people. Using the model as a reflective resource, practitioners can identify what they are doing well and what they might need to focus or improve upon. Managers can also foster better practice by facilitating and supporting their staff to reflect on their relationship building.

The model itself challenges the current youth justice convention that the initial focus of relationship building with a young person should prioritise gathering intelligence for risk assessment. Instead trust building is preferred, with risk assessment, albeit important, deferred for a suitable later stage in the process. Relational practice with young people is at the heart of youth diversion work and can underpin and enhance other interventions, programmes and tools used by youth justice and other human service practitioners.

The model offers a small number of evidence-informed signposts for practitioners. The compliance requirement is small and intends to guide rather than mandate with a general assumption that practitioners want to perform well. Future research will help determine whether a small number of guiding heuristics for practitioners have the same or possibly more capacity for policy-aligned practice than exhaustive manuals which attempt to predict every scenario. Indeed, there is existing evidence to support the view that prescriptive procedures can create the conditions for greater discretion due to capacity limitations to implement and not necessarily equate to greater compliance (Munro, 2009). However, more time will be required to engage practitioners and further mine practice wisdom to outline additional ways of effective working.

The findings from this research potentially have a purpose beyond youth justice settings. In other services where relationships between adults and young people are key, for example, in schools where collaborative relational approaches are used, the model could act as a useful reference point for developing outcome-focused relationships.

3. Conclusion

This Academic Insights paper describes the model and guidance developed from synthesising the scientific knowledge on relationship building with the practice experience of working on the ground with young people in a selection of YDPs in Ireland. The research focused on 'how to practice' good relationships with young people in youth justice settings, an area of enquiry that is understudied in international literature (Fullerton et al., 2021). The combination of international evidence from the systematic evidence review with practice evidence shared by practitioners, can provide a more nuanced account of 'what works' in relational practice to address youth offending.

In this three-year action research project, the research team have co-created an evidence-informed model and accompanying guidance to aid relationship building with crime-involved young people. While the model and guidance does not account for every eventuality, it does provide clear direction that youth justice practitioners can follow when trying to build successful and effective relationships. We acknowledge that there is no 'magic bullet' for impactful relational working (Fullerton et al., 2021, p. 9). It is a continually emerging craft skill. Practitioners will still need to use intuition and experience to build successful relationships that will improve outcomes for young people. However, youth justice practitioners can now make reasonable assumptions about effective practice by reference to the guidance.

The Department of Justice in Ireland has funded the scaling out and dissemination of the YDP Relationship Model and guidance to all YDPs nationwide (100 projects with over 400 staff). The scale-out adopts the same research and practice-informed approach; locally focussed but informed by evidence and nested within a common policy mission. A new national YDP Research and Development Team is responsible for its overall implementation. It is intended that a combined top-down/bottom-up approach will mitigate the frustrating strategy-to-practice implementation gap observed in other principle-led youth justice reforms (Case et al., 2024; Hampson et al., 2024; Hampson, 2023).

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