



Participatory Youth Practice

Engagement Framework

Manchester Centre for Youth Studies

Contents

Introduction	3
Let Them Participate	5
Always Unpick Why	8
Acknowledge Limited Life Chances	10
Help Problem Solve	14
Help Them Find Better Options	16
Develop Ambitions	19
Remember It's Their Choice	24
Afford Them A Fresh Start	26

MCYS would like to thank GMYJUP for its support in the development of the PYP framework.

Introduction

Welcome to our guide to the Participatory Youth Practice Framework. The strengths-based framework set out in this guide is designed to support you in enhancing your participatory practice with children and young people involved in the youth justice system. Each step laid out in the framework is based on the recognition that children have the right to be heard, and have their opinions meaningfully considered, at all stages of decision-making in the youth justice system. It can also be drawn upon in the context of early intervention and prevention work.

The participatory youth practice framework uses children's lived experiences, supported by academic theory and trauma-informed research evidence, to suggest a new approach to youth justice. It follows eight youth-led principles co-developed with children themselves and consists of a series of session guides designed to help practitioners put the theory of Participatory Youth Practice into their sessions with children.

These 8 principles include the following:

- **Let them participate**
- **Always unpick why**
- **Acknowledge limited life chances**
- **Avoid threats and sanctions**
- **Help problem solve**
- **Develop ambitions**
- **Remember it's their choice**
- **Afford them a fresh start**

The session guides are underpinned by these eight youth-led principles, providing practical advice and tips for working with children. Each resource can be used to support a session with a child.

We recognise that practice with children in the youth justice system, or at risk of entering, depends on the development of a trusting and highly individual relationship with each child. With that in mind, please consider the following a series of flexible suggestions for enhancing your practice by underpinning your good practice into a framework designed by children, rather than a rigid set of steps, which must be followed in a particular way or order.

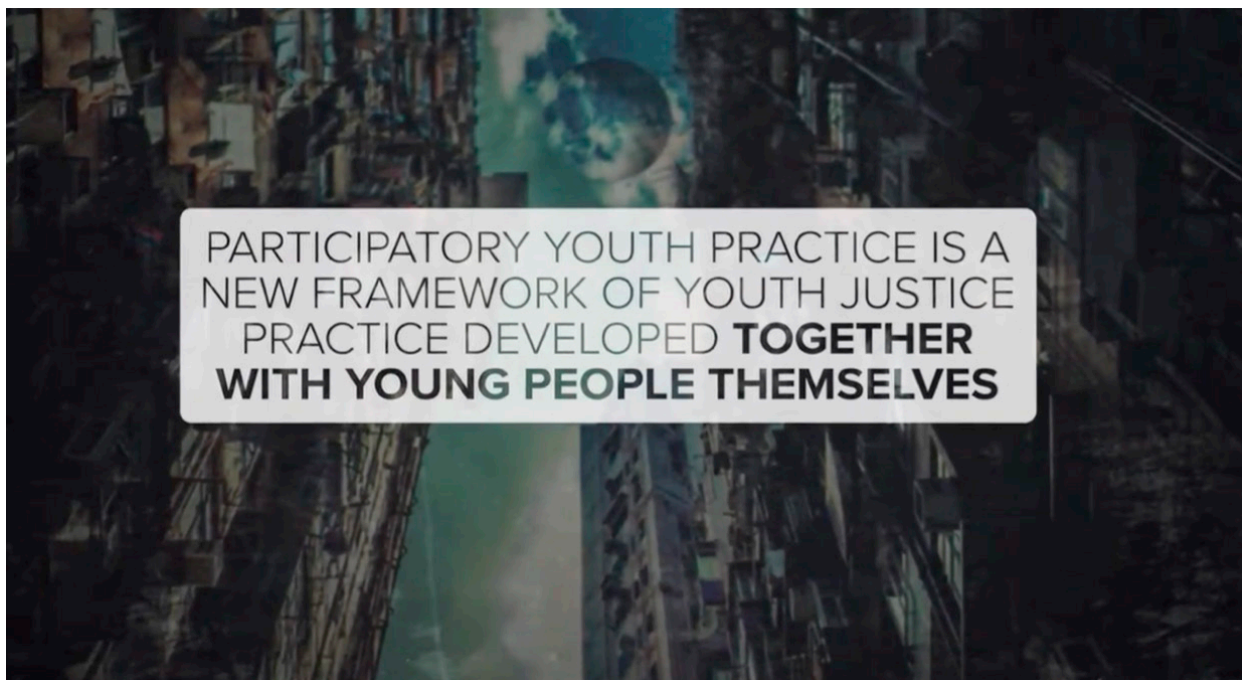
The Participatory Youth Practice Framework was co-created with children involved in the Youth Justice System using a variety of creative methodologies and interactive workshops.

If you would like to know more about the development of the Participatory Youth Practice Framework, **you can find this on our website:**

mmu.ac.uk/mcys/gmyjup/pyp/

You can also see the film developed in partnership with children involved in the Youth Justice System in which they explore their own perspectives on the importance of participatory practice:

youtube.com/watch?v=AljXXpOxi5Q



Step 1:

Let them participate

By law, children have a right to express their opinions on decisions that affect them, and to have those opinions taken into account by the adults who work with them. They also have the right to contribute to an effective response to their own behaviour, and to expect that adults will make active efforts to elicit their views and opinions at each stage of the justice process.

Engaging children in participatory processes within or on the periphery of the youth justice system can of course be a challenging process. Contact with a child may be more limited and/or inconsistent than we would like it to be, and it can take considerable time to establish a trusting relationship with a child which encourages them to open up about their life experiences, views, and feelings.

For this reason, we recommend making your willingness to hear and respond to the child's views clear on initial contact with a child. Explain what your role will be in the child's life, but also make it clear that working in partnership is something you will prioritise in your relationship.

“They really should start listening to you, ... but they just go through what they’ve got to do. That’s their procedure. That’s their job.”

(Ant, aged 15)

Toolkit: Opening a conversation

To set a context for participation, have an open conversation with a child. Highlight your interest in their knowledge and experiences and explain that you are going to be working in a way which values participation and will allow them to take ownership of their journey.

In your initial conversation with a child, we recommend:



Setting clear expectations

Take the time to set clear expectations. Be realistic about what their work with you means, what is expected of them, and what your role will be in the process moving forward.



Make it clear you want to work with them, not on them

Show your compassion. Communicate your interest in their ideas and experiences and explain that you want to support them to contribute to the work they will be doing with you.



Explaining the process in clear language

Explain the structure of the youth justice process as clearly as possible. How long could they be working with you? What could happen if they don't comply? What will happen after their contact with you ends?



Address perceptions of injustice

Have an open conversation about a child's perception of injustice. Make it clear you want a relationship based on reciprocity, and their feelings are important.



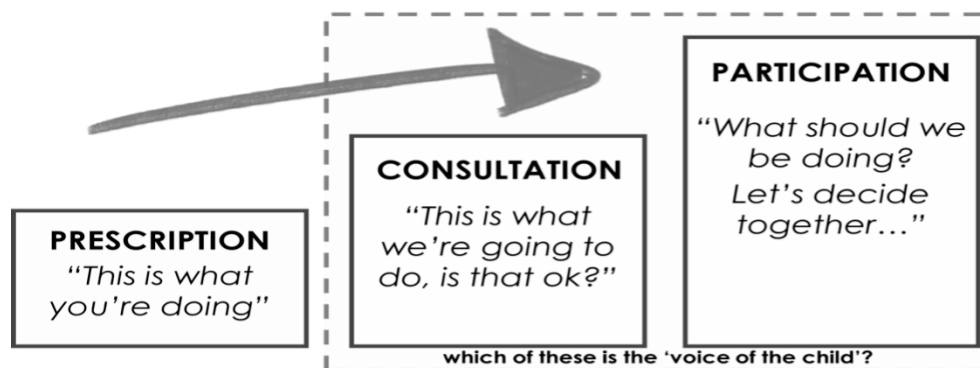
Consider how they can make this a positive experience

Find at least one positive thing for the child's future that you can work on together which can be achieved by the end of their work with you.

Embedding participation

For many children, adult run systems such as youth justice, education or children’s services can appear highly complex and don’t always seem to operate fairly. However, research shows that embedding participatory practice can both improve youth engagement with the process of youth justice and help to create a sense of optimism or ambition for the future.

The children we worked with when developing this framework said they wanted more opportunities to have their voices heard at each stage of the process. They wished to not only be consulted about their opinions, but to participate in decision-making:



Aim to involve children in decision-making at each stage of your work together.



Focusing on creating opportunities for engagement

Find regular opportunities for joint decision-making (e.g. deciding topics of discussion and activities in meetings together).



Check in regularly

Openly discuss any changes in circumstances which may be affecting them.



Draw on activities from this framework

Each activity described in this guide prioritises participation.

Step 2:

Always unpick why

Youth justice interventions, and other early interventions, often focus on the negative consequences of children's behaviours. Whilst exploring these with children can be important, our research shows that many children already know that they've done wrong, and that they have caused hurt to others.

For these children, going over the consequences of their behaviours does not necessarily help to influence or change their behaviours in the long-term. Whilst many children acknowledge the harm they have caused by their behaviours, they often also feel victimised themselves (by others or their own actions).

To truly understand and then influence children's decision-making processes, we therefore recommend an approach that focuses on the 'why' of their previous behaviours in sessions by also exploring their benefits for the child. Doing this in a participatory way involves intentionally creating space for a child to share any feelings about personal circumstances, unmet needs, fears and hopes that impact their decisions.

"They've got to understand that there are... reasons why you do shit."

(Jay, aged 16)

Toolkit:

Establishing the benefits of presenting behaviours

In opening up a conversation with a child on the reasons for their presenting behaviours, consider that there may be two main contexts in which a child might present certain behaviours:

1. Whilst the costs of these behaviours outweigh the benefits, the child didn't appreciate this at the time.

Some children act impulsively, or do not fully appreciate where their actions might lead.

2. The benefits of these behaviours actually outweigh the costs (or at least it feels that way for a child).

Unmet needs and external pressures may mean that the benefits of their presenting behaviours may feel more valuable than the costs. Focus on discussing and supporting alternative ways of achieving the things they feel they are lacking.

Key talking points on understanding why we are seeing the presenting behaviours:



What pressures did I feel before I came here?

Talk about the personal circumstances, needs and feelings that led to the behaviour.



What was the overall balance of benefits and costs?

Work on weighing up the positive and negative consequences of their behaviours. Recognise children may perceive this differently and it could take some time to feel the balance 'tip'.



What did I hope to gain from my behaviour?

Openly discuss any benefits gained from their behaviour (including material benefits, identity and/or status)

Step 3:

Acknowledge limited life chances

It is easy to underestimate the importance of social inequalities in narrowing children's life chances, making offending seem a more attractive (or sometimes the only) option for fulfilling unmet needs or responding to external pressures. Often justice-involved children have been denied the protections of childhood and are now being excluded from the opportunities afforded to others in adolescence.

For those who are disadvantaged and marginalised, the period of adolescence can be especially difficult. Many children end up in a pattern of behaviours in an attempt to create a positive identity for themselves or to make up for disadvantage in an unequal society.

With this in mind, we recommend placing an acknowledgement of the role systematic failures and trauma have played in children's presenting behaviours at the heart of your practice. Having established the benefits that may have been gained from these behaviours in the past, open up a conversation about the pressures which a child feels may have closed down other options.

“People say... that you can be whatever the fuck you want. But... you can't just do whatever the fuck you want. That's a lie... You need money behind you and stuff like that... It's just how it is.”

(Ste, aged 17)

Toolkit: Exploring disadvantage

The matrix of disadvantages below provides talking points for exploring the pressures and disadvantages children face at different levels. Think about the structural challenges experienced by a child in each of the following areas: ‘myself’, ‘my everyday life’ and ‘my place in society’.

Myself



Neurodiversity

Does the child have specific neuro-diverse support? Do they have problems reading or writing? Do they have trouble understanding time and date? Do they have difficulties with language skill or expressing themselves?



Trauma and ACE's

Does the child have any traumatic or otherwise adverse childhood experiences? Are they still experiencing these? Have they ever received meaningful support for them?



Mental health and emotional wellbeing

What is the the child's emotional state? Have they accessed mental health services? Are they sad, anxious or irritable? Do they experience over-activity, inattention or impulsivity? Do they have a history of self-harm or suicidal thoughts/attempts? Are they taking medication?



Physical health

Do they have any physical health conditions which affect their everyday life and/or mobility? Are they taking medications?



Substance Use

Is the child engaging in substance use that impacts their everyday life and wellbeing? If so, for what reasons?

My everyday life



The child's living arrangements

Are the arrangements unstable, temporary, or over-crowded? Is the accommodation unhealthy or unsafe?



The care and supervision

Does the child have adequate primary care and supervision? Are their basic care needs being met? Is there any violence, abuse or neglect? If they are involved with the care system, are the provisions adequate and appropriate?



The child's relationships

Are there any issues with the child's relationships with their family members or carers? Are you concerned about the influence of their peers? Do they have a support network?



The child's local environment

Is the local environment affected by poverty or material deprivation? Does it lack amenities? Are there other local tensions, pressures or issues affecting everyday life there?



The child's financial circumstances

Do they lack a regular income from employment, benefits or support from parents? Do they have debt problems or suffer from financial deprivation? Does their income lack legitimacy?

My place in society



Experiences of discrimination

Does the child experience discrimination because of their racial, religious, sexual or gender identities? Do they feel marginalised or excluded in society? How does this impact everyday wellbeing, self-esteem and feelings about the future?



Previous experiences of the justice system

Has the child or anyone close to them previously been involved with the justice system? Do they feel stigmatised? Do they feel this has made it more difficult for them to access opportunities?



Education, training, or employment status

Have they been attending school/college? Are they currently in education or training? Do they have suitable prospects for employment or training?

Focusing on future change

- **Think about how you can create opportunities for change and integration.**

- **Ask the child what they find frustrating about their situation and try to help.**

- **Ask yourself what work you can do with this child to ease their transition to adulthood.**

- **Take the opportunity to give the child a say. That way they have some of the power and autonomy that comes with growing up, and not just responsibility.**

Step 4:

Help Problem Solve

Given that structural disadvantages and factors play such an important role in children's presenting behaviours, they are unlikely to be able to overcome these difficulties solely through their own efforts.

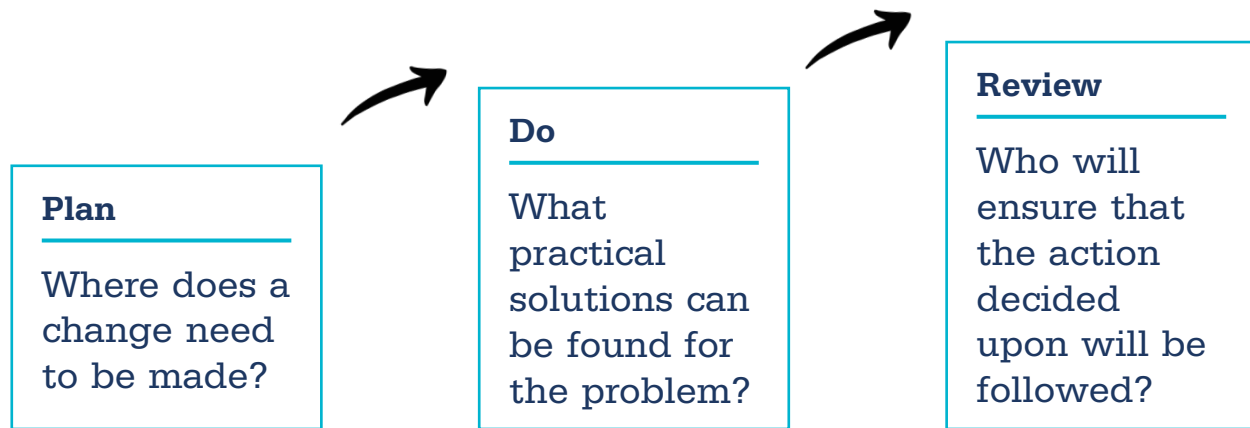
As well as acknowledging their problems, we therefore need to find active strategies to support them in solving the challenges they face on an everyday basis. Whilst realistically, structural problems rarely have straightforward solutions, working together to identify ways to alleviate immediate pressures affecting a child's life can be an important starting point in creating the conditions for addressing their presenting behaviours.

Work with the child to identify the key areas of their lives which require immediate change and discuss what forms of support can be put in place to achieve this.

“They [youth justice practitioners] have sorted me out a lot, but it doesn't get sorted out on its own, does it? It's not quick. Everything just takes time.”

(Tommy, aged 17)

Toolkit: Creating an action plan



In approaching the process of problem-solving, we recommend following these 4 key principles:



Make sure this is a co-creative process

Jointly approach this task with a child, and include members of their support network, if appropriate.



Support and encourage a child to make suggestions

And always consider how they are going to stick with something when you are no longer involved.



Use a child's own interests

Be creative in engaging them when designing this plan. You could incorporate this into a session involving an activity they enjoy or are good at, and which helps them to see their strengths and develop a sense of optimism.



Wherever possible, refer to a mainstream support service

(Rather than being attached to the youth justice team for an offending intervention) as this helps to avoid harmful stigma and labelling.

Step 5:

Help them find better options

Alongside receiving assistance with solving their immediate problems, children need support in finding long-term support and suitable opportunities. These will of course be highly individual to each child, and so taking a participatory approach to work in this context is especially important.

Within formal youth justice and other child services systems, limited time and resources can make it difficult to engage children in consistently participatory interventions. However, the children we worked with in developing the Participatory Youth Practice framework frequently expressed the view that they felt there could be far more opportunities for decision-making about their future options.

By working with (and not on) children, we can encourage them to take ownership of their journeys and exercise personal choice and independence. For these reasons we recommend an approach focused on finding better options which involves things “done with” rather than “done to” children, as this actively engages them in the process.

“I’d have a job any day... Family, house, kids, pets. Just being able to relax. ... I would ditch all this and have an easy life.”

(Ty, aged 17)

Toolkit: Exploring opportunities for personal choice

Independent decision-making and autonomy are known to be important skills in changing long-term behaviours. In thinking about developing these skills, open up a conversation with a child about the topic of personal choice, and what they would like to happen.

Ask the child about the extent to which they feel they have personal choice and independence:



Can they make decisions for themselves?

Explore how the child feels about the prospect of decision-making, and what skills they feel they have.



What things would they like to change?

Which areas of their lives would they like more control over? How could you support them to make this happen?



Do they feel in control of things that happen to them?

To what extent does the child feel they have had opportunities for personal choice and decision-making?



Where can they start exercising more choice?

In what areas of their life could you help to enhance opportunities for decision-making?

Life skills and coping

Life skills and coping mechanisms are important for all of our wellbeing, especially when we have adversity to overcome. Many children we come into contact with in youth justice or other child services have had to overcome substantial adversity. Some children have poor life skills and lack healthy coping mechanisms, and this contributes to their behaviour. Others have well-developed life skills and coping mechanisms but have had to deal with more than they can manage. We know that developing both good life skills and effective coping mechanisms is important in helping children.

Life Skills

These skills can involve things as simple as looking after yourself and staying safe, eating a healthy diet, exercising and meeting basic survival needs.

Discuss the child's life skills:

- Do they feel confident they are able to meet their own basic needs?
- Do they find time to look after themselves?
- What would they like to change or improve?
- How can they start developing more life skills?
- Can you help?

Coping mechanisms

Coping mechanisms help people achieve, and maintain, peace of mind - a feeling of emotional equilibrium, free from turmoil and stress.

Discuss the child's coping mechanisms:

- What do they do when they are feeling stressed, sad or unhappy?
- Do they cope with difficulties well?
- What would they like to change or improve?
- How can they start developing more coping mechanisms?
- Can you help?

Step 6:

Develop Ambitions

Many children feel excluded from society.

Children's interests, passions, goals, and aspirations are therefore vital in their journeys, and our job is to help nurture these, giving children not only other options, but something to hope for. To successfully address their behaviour, we must support children to develop a positive identity.

Consider the following questions: How can you help a child to start seeing themselves differently? How can you support them in feeling that their engagement with society will be chance to reinvent themselves? How can you make it clear that there is someone that believes in them?

Having opened up a conversation about options, work in partnership with a child to explore their ambitions for the future. We recommend structuring your session on this around four themes: positive goals and ambitions; developing a new identity; nurturing creativity; and finding happiness and meaning.

“Wait until I’ve got it all sorted and then be like: Yes, I am actually standing on my own two feet. I’ve got my own place sorted. I’ve got food. I’ve got a nice flat...got nice things. I want to show them [my family] that I can make it. I want to do that.”

(Jez, aged 17)

Toolkit: Positive goals

The first stage of this conversation involves working with a child to create positive goals for the future. Show enthusiasm for their hopes and ideas, no matter how basic, grand, or unrealistic they may appear.

In exploring positive goals, we recommend the following talking points:



What are they interested in?

What are they curious about? What knowledge do they have, or want to gain? Are they keen to learn about themselves, others, or a specific subject? Do they want to develop a skill or a passion (even if it is unconventional)?



What are their goals and aspirations?

Finding meaning in life is an important part of all of our lives. What sense do they have of who they are, where they are going, and what they want to do?



What are they passionate about?

Nurture any desire they express to be good at what they do, whether that is work, hobbies or leisure activities. Having passions or hobbies (even unconventional or illegal ones) represents a foundation from which a positive identity can be built.

Developing a new identity

A child's self-identity (the way they see themselves), and their social identity (the way others see them) both play a significant role in their presenting behaviours. Children who lack positive social or self-identities in many cases have very little reason to 'play by the rules.' Furthermore, for many children their behaviours may be a significant part of their identity and the only way they feel they can achieve recognition or status.

The next stage of exploring a child's long-term ambitions therefore involves exploring not only how children currently see themselves, but how they feel others perceive them, and what support they might need to create a new, more positive identity for the future:

In exploring the topic of identity, we recommend the following talking points:



How do they currently see themselves?

How do they feel about 'who they are'? What do they feel are their strengths and weaknesses? Do they experience low self-esteem? What would they like to build on?



How would they like others to see them?

What beliefs/actions/talents would they like to be known for? Do the perceptions of others match 'who they are on the inside'? Do they have any role models? What changes would they like to make to in future?



How do others see them?

What role do their close relationships and friendships play in their identities? How do they feel they are they perceived by others? Do they feel they 'belong' in any communities or groups? What would help them feel belonging in future?



Do they feel they have the power to change or improve the way the world sees them?

What would need to change in their lives to change how the world sees them? What are the 'first steps' in this process? What support do they feel they need?

Nurturing creativity

Children with neuro-diversities, educational needs and social difficulties are significantly overrepresented in youth justice caseloads. For these children, traditional educational and vocational routes can be a challenge, and given the high value society places on academic and vocational skills, they can often be left feeling like failures when they don't do as well as others.

The opportunity to exercise their creativity can have benefits for children both in building self-esteem and in encouraging desistance. Creativity doesn't just mean creating something (like art or crafts). It can be 'doing' something (like drama), trying something new or different or experimenting with experiences or new ways of expressing yourself.

In the next stage of exploring the child's ambitions with them, consider how they might integrate creative strengths and talents:

Explore and nurture young people's creativity, without focusing only on traditional ETE routes. Consider...



What are they good at?

What are their talents and/or creative skills? What activities have they had previous experience with?



What can they make or do that others can't?

Have they engaged in creative projects they feel proud of?



What do they like doing?

Which activities do they most enjoy? What gives them a sense of achievement? Are there activities that they feel bring personal benefits (e.g. build their connections with others or give them 'a say' in society)?



What would they like to try in future?

What skills would they like to develop? How can you help them access more opportunities?

Happiness and meaning

Happiness and finding a sense of meaning in life are important to all of us, and justice-involved children are no different. Often, presenting behaviours can be linked to a desire to achieve happiness, or even the desire to be part of a group with a common purpose and a shared identity.

Children often benefit from considering where they find happiness & meaning in their lives and exploring what other routes to these there might be out there. In the final stage of your conversation exploring a child's ambitions with them, centre the question of happiness and meaning in their vision for life in the future.

Consider the following areas:

What do they do that brings them happiness of pleasure?

- Are they able to enjoy social interactions?
- Do they seek out thrill seeking activities?
- Are their fun activities linked to presenting behaviours?
- What fun things would they like to do, but don't have chance?
- What would a 'happy life' look like to them in future?
- Can you help?

What meaning do they see in life?

- What is life all about, in their opinion?
- Do they feel there is a purpose to the things they do?
- Do they believe in anything?
- Do they share a common purpose with anyone?
- Would they like to have more direction or purpose?
- Can you help?

Step 7:

Remember it's their choice

Children have the right to make their own choices. Our role is to encourage, support and help children to make their own decisions, and to make this appear as attractive to them as possible.

Many children who become involved in the youth justice system have engaged in presenting behaviours as a result of exploitation and/or abuse by adults, while others have turned to these options in lieu of alternatives. As such, we need to recognise that the decision to “go straight”, can be incredibly tough. Choosing a different future can feel anxiety-provoking and often involves more sacrifices than we realise.

Many children take time to make this decision, and then need ongoing support to make it stick in the future. Progress therefore shouldn't be measured by whether risks have been ‘successfully managed’, but by the distance travelled by the individual child. Below are some recommendations to help you place children's decision-making at the heart of this process.

“You can't just do it because somebody says, “You've got to do this”. You don't do it for that. You do it because you want to do it.... You don't need people to make decisions for you”

(Josh, aged 16)

Toolkit: Supporting change

To encourage children to feel confident taking ownership of their change journeys, we recommend the following:



Build positive relationships

Focus on relationships with children, rather than prioritising interventions; providing engagement, a listening ear, motivation, and encouragement.



Be realistic

Making changes is a journey and lapses/relapses are to be expected. How these are dealt with is critical. Focus on encouraging progress.



Recognise the importance of language

Labelling children (for example as 'young offenders') confirms identities we're encouraging them to leave behind.



Keep explaining the process

Making changes can often be daunting and complex. Help children to feel in control by ensuring that you continue to explain their work with you, the wider system and what's required from them and us at each stage of the process.



Personalise interventions

It's important to adapt processes and procedures (as far as possible) to fit the child, not expect them to fit around the systems.



Recognition of the significance of social contexts

It's easy to underestimate the importance of social contexts and constraints with family, school, peers, community, and work.



Promoting positive change

Use encouraging and confirming positive change and restorative approaches wherever possible.



Create opportunities for change and integration

Children should experience belonging to a supportive society; reward constructive activities with encouragement.

Step 8:

Afford Them a Fresh Start

As children make the positive choice to change their behaviour for the future, perhaps the most important thing we can do is to afford them a fresh start.

Many of the children we spoke to when creating this framework felt they had been stigmatised because of their involvement in the youth justice system, and that this stigma had long-term, negative impacts on their efforts at integrating into communities and positively engaging with society.

Whilst making changes may be an incremental process, our research suggests that welcoming children's efforts to create a new future can substantially enhance positive outcomes. Every activity recommended in the Participatory Youth Framework could help you to do this, and to work in partnership with a child to help them to take a step in the right direction towards creating a new future.

“People just see the old me. I want people to see ... I’m not like that now. I’ve changed.”

(Jermaine, aged 16)

**We hope that you
have found this useful.
If you would like more
information on the PYP
framework you can get in
touch with MCYS Centre
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