

Parent Training Programs

One of the most widely used programs to deal with delinquency is parent training.⁵ Parent training programs are sometimes used alone, and they are sometimes used in combination with other programs—such as programs focusing on the early family environment, school-based programs, and programs focusing on individual traits.

Given the central role that the family plays in delinquency, it is not surprising that parent training is so widely used. As indicated, a variety of family factors affect delinquency, including weak emotional bonds between the parent(s) and child, poor supervision, abuse and neglect, and family conflict. These factors are important in and of themselves, and they are important because they affect certain of the other causes of delinquency, such as individual traits, school performance and attachment, and association with delinquent peers. Programs that can change the way parents relate to their children have much potential for controlling delinquency.

Parent training programs usually target the families of delinquents or juveniles at risk for delinquency. They also target families that are at risk for poor parenting, such as adolescent mothers or families where there is evidence of family violence. These programs are offered in the home, in clinics, or in other settings like schools. Sometimes they are provided to individual families, and sometimes they are provided to several families at once.

Parent training programs **typically have several components**. Most notably, they **teach parents how to more effectively discipline their children**. Poor discipline is not only a major cause of delinquency, but it also undermines the emotional bond between the parent and child and contributes to family conflict. Parents are taught how to set clear rules, better monitor their child's behavior, recognize both deviant and prosocial behavior, and properly sanction deviant behavior and reinforce prosocial behavior. Parents are encouraged to make more use of positive reinforcers, such as praise, rewards, privileges, and attention; and to make less use of punishers, such as criticism, yelling, and hitting. The preferred strategies of punishment involve time out (for children), loss of privileges, imposition of chores, clear expressions of disapproval, and reasoning. (If you would like to get a better sense of the skills that parent training programs try to teach, see the book *Living with Children* by Patterson and Gullion, 1977, which is used as a manual in one major parent training program.)

Parent training programs also **frequently teach family members how to better resolve conflicts with one another**. While proper disciplinary techniques reduce family conflict, they do not eliminate it. The parents and juvenile, for example, may still disagree over the rules that parents try to enforce or the punishments that parents administer. A common strategy for resolving such conflicts involves the negotiation of a behavioral contract between the parents and the juvenile, particularly adolescents. The contract clearly specifies the rules that juveniles must follow and the consequences for following and breaking rules. For example, adolescents may agree to go to school every day during the week in exchange for the privilege of staying out until midnight on Friday and Saturday nights. The adolescent typically plays a major role in developing such contracts. Parents and juveniles are taught how to negotiate such contracts, and they may also call on a therapist for assistance. By reducing conflict, such negotiation also helps strengthen family bonds.

Parent training programs may also do such things as **teach family members better communication skills, alter the expectations that parents have for their children** (the

unrealistic expectations of parents sometimes contribute to abuse and other problems), and **encourage family members to spend more time together in pleasurable activities**. Parents are taught such skills and practices through a variety of strategies: They receive reading materials and/or direct instruction, they are exposed to models who display these practices, they rehearse these practices themselves and receive feedback, and they receive continued guidance when they apply these practices in their homes.

Parent training programs have shown much promise in reducing delinquency, although they are not effective with all families. There are difficulties in inducing families to participate, especially the families that need it most (Kazdin, 1994). Also, parent training is often difficult to successfully implement when families face multiple stressors—poverty, poor housing, work problems, and family violence. Efforts, however, are being made to deal with these problems, including efforts to reduce family stressors and improve the ability of parents to cope with stressors. Also, there are efforts to provide financial and other incentives to participate in these programs.

The effectiveness of these programs is undoubtedly the result of a number of factors. As indicated, they **strengthen the bond between parent and child, improve parental discipline, and reduce family conflict and abuse**. At a more general level, they reduce strain. Adolescents are subject to less negative treatment and receive more positive stimuli from parents. In particular, there is a reduction in family conflict, abuse, and the use of harsh disciplinary techniques. These programs also **promote the social learning of conventional behavior**. Parents clearly state rules that condemn deviance; parents function as conventional role models, avoiding the use of violent disciplinary techniques; conventional behavior is consistently reinforced; and deviant behavior is consistently punished. Further, such programs clearly result in an **increase in control**. Direct control is obviously increased; also, the adolescent's emotional bond to parents is increased, and the adolescent is more likely to internalize beliefs condemning deviance and develop a high level of self-control. Finally, such programs **reduce negative labeling**, since parents are less likely to verbally (as well as physically) abuse their children.

Several researchers have suggested that society make parent training programs generally available, incorporating them into the high school curriculum or offering them to the parents of all newborn children. This would reduce the stigma of participating in such programs and might make it easier to secure funding for such programs (since they would no longer be seen as special programs for the poor or disadvantaged). Many European countries have moved in this direction, but only a few schools and areas in the United States have done so (see Sherman et al., 2002, for more information).

Programs Focusing on School Factors

As you know, delinquency is also related to a range of negative school experiences, including poor school performance, low attachment to school, low school involvement, low educational goals, and poor relations with teachers. Delinquency is also more common in certain types of schools, including schools that are large, have poor discipline, provide few opportunities for student success, have low expectations for students, have unpleasant working conditions for students, have poor cooperation between teachers and administrators, and have low community involvement (see Chapter 15 for more information).

Several programs try to address these factors. Some programs focus on the individual, with most such programs attempting to boost school performance. It is felt that

individuals who perform well in school will come to like school, get involved in school activities, develop high educational goals, and get along well with teachers. Other programs focus on the larger school environment—including the classroom and entire school—and attempt to change this environment in ways that will reduce delinquency.⁶

Preschool programs. Evidence suggests that good preschool programs can both improve school performance and reduce delinquency. Most such programs focus on preschool children in disadvantaged areas, and they attempt to promote the social and intellectual development of these children as well as increase their parents' involvement in the educational process. The best preschool programs begin early in life, last two years or more, have low student-to-teacher ratios, and employ carefully designed curriculums. In addition, the teachers meet regularly with the parents to discuss ways that the parents can foster their children's social and intellectual development. The success of preschool programs is further enhanced if the children continue to receive assistance once they have begun school. Many of the *Head Start* programs throughout the country meet these criteria, with these programs providing preschool to almost 1 million disadvantaged children—or about three out of five eligible children.

In-school programs. A range of in-school programs attempt to improve the school performance of individual students and address other school experiences related to delinquency. These programs tend to focus on students doing poorly in school, students rated as disruptive by teachers and others, and delinquents. The most straightforward of these programs provide tutoring to students, with the tutoring being done by other students, community volunteers, trained paraprofessionals, and teachers. Such programs are effective at boosting school performance, but it is not yet known whether they reduce delinquency.

Other programs are more elaborate, and several have been found to affect both school experiences and delinquency. In certain programs, for example, juveniles sign a contract with school officials. The juveniles agree to do such things as attend school on a regular basis, do their schoolwork, and behave properly in class. Program staff members provide needed services to the juveniles, such as tutoring and counseling. The program staff also train teachers and sometimes parents to monitor the juveniles' performance and provide assistance when necessary. The juveniles receive regular feedback about their performance from program staff. Staff members discuss ways in which the juveniles might improve when they receive negative reports, and they reinforce the juveniles when the juveniles meet the terms of their contracts. For example, they praise the juveniles and provide them with points that can be traded in for things like CDs and school trips.

Altering the classroom environment. Other programs attempt to alter the classroom environment in ways that improve classroom performance, increase school attachment and involvement, improve relations with teachers and classmates, and improve discipline.

For example, researchers have attempted to reduce delinquency through the strategies of interactive teaching, proactive classroom management, and cooperative learning groups. Interactive teaching provides students with specific objectives they must master, provides frequent feedback, provides help when necessary, employs objective grading, and bases grades on mastery of material and improvement over past performance—not on

comparisons with other students. Such teaching increases the opportunities for the students to succeed, and the grading methods increase perceptions of fairness and decrease competition with other students. Teachers using proactive classroom management are taught to clearly state rules for classroom behavior, recognize and reward attempts to cooperate, make frequent use of encouragement and praise, and minimize the impact of disruptions. Cooperative learning groups consist of small, heterogeneous groups of students who help one another master classroom materials and who receive recognition as a team for their accomplishments. These groups serve to reduce alienation, reinforce cooperation, and promote attachment among students.

Another example of a successful program focusing primarily on the classroom environment is an antibullying program that is modeled on the program developed by Olweus (1991) in Norway. Bullying is an important form of delinquency in itself, and it may contribute to further delinquency, partly for reasons related to strain theory. According to Olweus (1991:413), "a person is being bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons" (also see Chapter 15). Negative actions are defined as intentional actions that inflict or attempt to inflict injury or discomfort upon another. A successful antibullying program has several key features. A school-based team is formed to address bullying, with team members including administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, and students. A questionnaire is administered in the school to determine the nature and extent of bullying. The results from this questionnaire are publicized to make everyone aware of the problem. Clear rules against bullying are established, and these rules are widely publicized. Teachers and others closely monitor student activities; students are taught to report bullying and help victims; and anonymous reporting procedures are established. Instances of bullying are quickly sanctioned in a nonhostile manner. And the victims of bullying are provided support and taught skills to reduce the likelihood of further bullying (see Whitted and Dupper, 2005, for more information).

Changing the school environment. A number of programs have tried to change the school environment as a whole. These programs usually employ several strategies, and it is often difficult to determine which of these strategies has the greatest impact on delinquency. Most programs try to change schools in ways that improve student performance, increase school attachment and involvement, improve school discipline, and generally make the school environment more satisfying.

These programs often begin by creating teams that include school administrators, teachers, parents, students, and others. These teams evaluate the school and then help plan and implement school improvements. Such improvements often include the following: Teachers are taught innovative teaching and classroom management techniques. Students help develop school disciplinary rules. Steps are taken to make sure that these rules are clearly stated; widely publicized through devices like newsletters, posters, and ceremonies; and enforced in a consistent and fair manner. There is an effort to make greater use of positive reinforcers, like praise and privileges, for conventional behavior. There is better communication with parents about the positive and negative behaviors of their children. An effort is made to involve parents more actively in the school. For example, volunteer opportunities are created for parents, and parental input is solicited on important issues. An effort is made to reduce student "downtime," so that students have less unsupervised

and unstructured time. There is increased monitoring of the lunchroom, rest rooms, and school grounds. An effort is made to increase the involvement and success experiences of high-risk students, usually through an expansion of extracurricular activities and through special academic and counseling programs such as career exploration programs and job-seeking skills programs. A variety of programs addressing individual traits conducive to delinquency are developed. These include social skills training, anger management, and programs designed to instill conventional beliefs. Students, teachers and others launch school pride campaigns, which include things like pep rallies and school cleanup programs. The problems associated with large schools are addressed by creating "schools within schools." That is, small groups of students are assigned to the same homeroom and many of the same classes.

Taken together, such programs can have a substantial impact on those school factors associated with delinquency. They **reduce strain**. Students are better able to achieve their educational goals, they are treated more fairly by school officials, they find school more interesting and pleasant, and they get along better with teachers and fellow students. These programs also **increase control**. Students are better supervised at school; they develop a stronger bond to teachers and fellow students. They develop a greater investment in conventional activities—through their higher school performance and educational goals—and they are exposed to conventional beliefs and taught to exercise self-control. Further, these programs **foster the social learning of conventional behavior**. Students are more likely to form close associations with conventional role models, be exposed to conventional beliefs, and be consistently reinforced for conventional behavior and punished for deviance. Finally, these programs **reduce negative labeling** by school officials.

Programs Focusing on Individual Traits

As indicated in Chapter 13, the super-traits of low self-control and irritability contribute to delinquency. These super-traits encompass several more specific traits, including the following:

- impulsivity (the tendency to act without thinking)
- risk seeking
- amoral beliefs or beliefs favorable to delinquency
- a tendency to become easily upset or angry
- a tendency to blame one's problems on others
- little concern for the feelings or rights of others
- an aggressive or antagonistic interactional style

Many of the programs described earlier have an impact on these traits. As you may recall, these traits are often a function of biological factors and the early family environment. Many of the family programs we described attempt to reduce biological harms and improve the family environment, so they should affect these traits. Many school-based programs also affect individual traits, including such traits as impulsivity and beliefs regarding delinquency.

The programs described in this section, however, focus directly on individual traits. These programs are offered in both preschool and regular school. They may be offered to all juveniles or to juveniles at risk for delinquency. Also, these programs are frequently used to rehabilitate juvenile delinquents who are in community treatment programs or institutions. There are several common programs, each focusing on a somewhat different

set of traits. These programs go under a variety of names, including social and interpersonal skills training, problem-solving training, anger management, conflict resolution, and violence prevention curriculums.⁷

Officials sometimes employ several programs or elements from several programs. They target a range of individual traits and often do the following: They teach juveniles the skills necessary for effective interaction with others. (These include such basic social skills as maintaining eye contact when talking with someone. They also include more advanced skills, such as recognizing and showing sensitivity to the feelings of others.) The programs teach juveniles how to respond to problems without engaging in delinquency. In particular, they teach juveniles how to be assertive (rather than aggressive), how to negotiate with others, how to manage their anger, and how to respond to a range of problems, including teasing from peers and criticism from teachers. Related to this, they teach basic problem-solving skills. In particular, juveniles are taught to stop and think before they act rather than responding in an impulsive manner. The programs also teach juveniles beliefs that favor conventional behavior and condemn delinquency. This is done by providing information about the negative consequences of delinquency, letting students know that various forms of delinquency are less common among their peers than they might think, and getting students and classes to take public stands against various types of delinquency, such as drug use and violence. Peer leaders often assist in this process, since students may be more likely to trust and identify with them.

These programs, then, target a range of individual traits conducive to delinquency, including impulsivity, risk seeking, beliefs favorable to delinquency, anger, lack of concern for others, and aggressive interactional styles. In some cases, officials may also treat certain traits with medication. Most notably, hyperactivity is often treated with drugs like Ritalin. Such drugs have shown some success in reducing delinquency, although certain evidence suggests that drugs are most effective when combined with programs of the type described here (see Wasserman and Miller, 1998).

Targeting individual traits may reduce strain, reduce negative labeling, increase control, and foster the social learning of conventional behavior. In particular, juveniles will be in a better position to achieve their goals, will be treated in a more positive manner by others, and will be less likely to respond to strain with delinquency. They will be less likely to be negatively labeled by others. They will be higher in control—particularly self-control and beliefs condemning delinquency. And they will be better able to resist the influence of delinquent peers and act in conventional ways that result in reinforcement.

In order to give you a better sense of what these programs are like, let us describe the basic components of problem-solving training and anger management programs.

Problem-solving training. Dodge (1986) lists the following five steps in effective problem-solving: (1) search for cues in the environment; (2) interpret these cues; (3) generate possible responses to the situation; (4) consider the possible consequences of the responses; and (5) enact the chosen response. Data suggest that delinquents have problems at each of these steps. They attend to fewer environmental cues; they tend to focus on aggressive cues; they often attribute hostile intent when there is none; they generate fewer alternate solutions; they generate more aggressive responses; they fail to recognize the negative consequences of delinquent behavior; and they often lack the social skills to enact prosocial responses (see Kazdin, 1994). Problem-solving training teaches juveniles

to carefully perform each of the steps necessary for effective problem solving and to avoid the mistakes just listed. The instructor describes and models the steps in effective problem solving. The child is then asked to apply these steps to an imaginary problem, often making statements to himself or herself which call attention to the mental tasks that are to be performed. In the Think Aloud program, for example, children are taught to ask themselves a series of four questions: "What is my problem?" "What is my plan?" "Am I using my plan?" and "How did I do?" (Hollin, 1990a:66). The WISER way teaches youth to Wait, Identify the problem, generate Solutions, Evaluate the consequences, and self-Reinforce (Hollin, 1990b:485). The instructor prompts the youth when necessary and provides feedback and reinforcement. Eventually, the youths apply the steps to real-life problems. Such training addresses several of the specific traits listed earlier, including impulsivity, risk seeking, and aggressive interactional styles.

Anger management. Anger management programs teach juveniles how to limit or control their anger, with the goal of promoting more adaptive behavior. Most programs have several features in common. First, juveniles explore the causes and consequences of their anger. They may do this by keeping a diary or log of events that made them angry and their reaction to these events. The causes of anger include not only external events but also the internal statements made about those events. Aggressive individuals, for example, are more likely to interpret the ambiguous acts of others as hostile in intent, so the stare of a stranger may be interpreted as a deliberate challenge. The diary may help identify such self-statements. It may also help identify the early warning signs of anger, such as tensed muscles or flushing. Second, the juveniles learn techniques for more effectively controlling their anger—counting backward, imagining a peaceful scene, deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and self-statements like "calm down" and "cool off." Some programs also attempt to increase the juvenile's level of self-efficacy in an attempt to further increase self-control. In addition to teaching juveniles to reduce or more effectively control their anger, these programs often teach social and problem-solving skills that allow for a more adaptive response to situations. Finally, juveniles receive much practice applying the preceding techniques, first in response to imaginary provocations and eventually in real-life settings. And they receive much feedback and reinforcement as they apply these techniques (see Blackburn, 1993; Hollin, 1990a).

The most effective programs focusing on individual traits employ similar training techniques. These techniques include direct instruction; modeling of the desired behaviors by the trainer or others; role playing by the youth, with feedback from the trainer and others; reinforcement for appropriate behavior; and homework assignments that require using the newly acquired traits or skills in real-life settings. Certain programs make special efforts to ensure that these skills will be used in the outside world, such as making the training as similar to real life as possible and attempting to ensure that the new skills are reinforced in real-life settings. Many of the parent training and other programs described earlier use similar training techniques. Such techniques are part of the cognitive-behavioral approach described earlier.

Programs Focusing on Delinquent Peers and Gangs

As you know, associating with delinquent peers and gang members is a major cause of delinquency. Such association creates much strain, since delinquent peers and gang members frequently get into conflicts with one another and others. Such association reduces