



# Mentoring matters

Stuart Johnson, Head of Youth Offending Services for Tower Hamlets and the City of London, believes mentoring is key to crime prevention

My large, multi-agency, multi-partnership team offers a range of professional disciplines to try to address the root causes of offending. Within that framework, a good mentoring system can really help youngsters break offending habits and look to a positive future.

Today's social and case work professionals have high case loads and don't have the opportunity to give quality time to young people outside of the office or the odd home visit. In addition, it's more difficult to engage a young person in a discussion across a desk in an office – they feel stultified.

Volunteers and mentors can give that valuable time. Only by spending time with a young person, sharing their experiences and really getting to know them can you build up trust and help them relax and voice their feelings and concerns. The young people seem to respond positively and respect the fact that a non-professional is motivated to help them. This creates a unique relationship.

The key to mentoring success lies in local non-professionals with a genuine interest in helping young people. It's important to have good listening skills and assessment skills. A sense of humour and the ability to show respect to young people are also important as a lot of young offenders have never been shown much respect. It's also important to engage someone who understands the difficulties that adolescents face. In this area, peer mentoring and counselling is a very powerful tool.

Another approach is to use a significant adult who is familiar with

the young person as a mentor, such as an uncle. Working with the Youth Advocate Programme (YAP), we use this highly effective 'wraparound' approach to engage the significant adult, paying them to spend extra time with young person.

## Boosting confidence

Even our most aggressive young offenders lack personal confidence. They feel worthless and a nuisance, and that people are judging them. Mentors can build a young person up and praise them for what they do well and for trying. Lots of our young people possess qualities that, if channeled properly, would make them world beaters. They are risk takers and entrepreneurs, often with good planning skills and tremendous determination. Through mentoring, we try to harness these skills and energy in a positive way.

In addition, mentoring can give them the confidence to do more with their life. Young offenders are becoming increasingly territorial – they are so afraid of their own communities – who might be after them, what harm might befall them – that they think the next neighbourhood will be even worse. The thought of crossing to another part of the city to go to college, for example, may be completely hostile to them. Mentoring can help them to overcome these fears and feel safe and capable of doing things on their own.

Mentors need training on substance misuse, education, behavioural, health and leisure issues. Good training and practical experience offers the mentor a

useful route into employment, too.

Targeted mentoring that takes in cultural needs and provides a specific service for a particular community can be effective as each group presents its own concerns and worries. The beauty of using people from a particular community is that the youngsters have a greater sense of trust and belief that their problems will be understood more readily.

For example, the Youth Justice Board helps to fund a Bengali youth community project in London's Brick Lane to deliver mentoring services to Bangladeshi youngsters who are at risk of offending. The reason we established this group was in response to findings that nearly all the young people who committed street robbery in 2002 were black or Asian – we could focus on the 25 young offenders with the mentoring programme.

Mentoring is also vital for youngsters upon release from custody. This is a crucial time – in those first few weeks, a young person may be motivated to make a change and can benefit from help and encouragement. They may also not have renewed old acquaintances who might lead them back to a criminal lifestyle. The timely intervention of a mentor can help to break that cycle.

All our feedback indicates that young people put mentoring high on their list of things that have helped them. The importance of this type of practical help should not be underestimated.

**Young people respect the fact that a non-professional wants to give their time and is motivated to help**



**Contact** For more information about mentoring, visit: [www.yjb.gov.uk](http://www.yjb.gov.uk). Contact your local Youth Offending Team to see what opportunities are available for volunteers and mentors in your area.