

Conceptualizing Psycho-Social Intervention with Juvenile Offenders as Attachment Therapy: A Practical Approach

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Abstract : A wide majority of older children and adolescents who enter the juvenile court system present with an array of problematic symptoms and behaviors including anxiety, depression, aggressive acting out, detachment, and substance abuse. Attachment theory offers a framework for understanding normative and pathological functioning, which during development is influenced by emotional, social and cognitive elements. There is clear evidence that children and adolescents with the highest risk of developing adaptation problems present an insecure attachment profile. Most offending minors have experienced dysfunctional family relationships as well as social and/or economic deprivation. Their maladaptive attachment develops not only through their relationship with caregivers but with the environment at large. Activation of their faulty attachment system leads them to feel emotionally overwhelmed and engage in destructive behaviors and decision-making. A psycho-social intervention with this population conceptualized as attachment therapy is a multi-faceted, practical approach that has shown excellent results in terms of increased psychological well-being and drastically reduced rates of re-offense/ destructive behavior. Through several components including psychotherapy, monitoring, volunteering, meditation and socialization, the program focuses on seven dimensions: self-efficacy, responsibility, empathy/reparation, autonomy/security, containment/structure, insight building, and relational health. This paper presents the program and illustrates how the framework of attachment theory practically applied to psycho-social intervention has great therapeutic and social reparation potential. Preliminary evidence drawn from the Sassari Juvenile Court is very promising; this paper will illustrate these results and propose an even more comprehensive, applicable approach to psycho-social reparative intervention that leads to greater psychological health and reduced recidivism in the child and adolescent population.

Keywords : attachment, child, adolescent, crime, juvenile, psychosocial

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