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# The Many Benefits of Training Direct Care Staff as Life-Skills Instructors

By Bert Zeegers

**M**any juvenile offenders believe that everyone lies, cheats and steals. They think no one can be trusted and that rules and laws do not apply to them. They focus on short-term pleasures — like drugs, sex and alcohol — without considering the long-term results.

Often, juvenile offenders are school dropouts who can barely read or write. They arrive in facilities unprepared to succeed in a world in which high school is a minimum requirement. Devoid of competitive skills, they are forever relegated to menial jobs. Aside from the punish-

ment passed down from the courts, these youths and their families also are sentenced to a lifetime of misery. All too often, these troubled teens are armed and dangerous. Their trade? Thug life, murder, robbery, drug dealing, gangs and conceiving trophy babies who also end up unwanted, unloved and unable to cope in a society that demands the equivalent of advanced degrees in life skills.

That is the bad news. The good news is that it is possible to successfully challenge these self-destructive thoughts and the lifestyle they often lead to. Doing so requires that juvenile justice professionals deal effec-

tively with these disenfranchised citizens during their incarceration so that they may have a fighting chance upon re-entry into society. The goal of juvenile justice professionals should be to offer the best possible educational services to the young men and women while they are in their charge.

## Awakening The Minds of Youths

When life-management skills lessons arrive early enough in a delinquent youth's life, they help develop a weapon more powerful than guns: a

mind trained to make good decisions. Experience shows that the diminished use of antisocial behaviors coupled with the increased use of pro-social alternatives is central to a successful outcome for these youths. There are few programs that offer this combination through materials and interactions that are budget-friendly, easily understood, interactive and specifically designed to be taught in the most antisocial environment imaginable — one in which youths are held under lock and key 24 hours a day, often for years at a time.

The average juvenile justice group session usually is comprised of youths of widely varying ages and educational backgrounds. Many exhibit severe emotional, learning and behavioral disabilities that may manifest themselves in a variety of ways such as difficulties in listening, reading, writing, paying attention and all-around serious behavioral problems. As a whole, the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning reports that youths in correctional environments perform an average three years below grade level. Attempting to educate this population, even in an ideal public school setting (from which they, in all likelihood, have been expelled), would be a Herculean effort in and of itself. Compound this with the less-than-perfect environment in most facilities, and the job of returning these juvenile lawbreakers to society as positively contributing members is not an easy one.

Enter the ARISE Life-Skills program. It is all that a juvenile justice professional could ask for. This unique program offers these youths and those who are charged with the task of teaching them three major benefits:

- It is inexpensive — The ARISE Foundation is a nonprofit organization so there are no stockholders to impress;
- It is targeted — ARISE is written specifically for high-risk, incarcerated youths; and
- It is designed to be taught and retaught — ARISE materials are developed to be used by direct care staff because they generally do not have prior teaching

experience or a college education.

The program develops a partnership with each facility and exists on results, not on a quick sale. Objective and independent analyses reflect these successes as well. One of the most important factors in selecting a life-skills program is whether it is statistically validated. ARISE has been the focus of a five-year study by the University of Miami's Department of Sociology, which has validated its approach and philosophy. The findings report significant improvement in knowledge of issues included in the program's content, violence reduction, goal setting, anger management, drugs and alcohol avoidance, and other life-management skills. The study also reports a "significant improvement in test scores and attitudes among learners of all ethnic groups for each time period examined."

Even correctional staff who have never had to "stand and deliver" in front of a group before are much more excited than intimidated given their comprehensive pre-instruction training. Through the use of everyday language, role-plays and interactive group lessons, ARISE and its instructors are able to awaken the minds of youths who have dozed through classes for years. In fact, many juvenile detainees who spent significant time in foster homes after being abused or deserted by their parents are now learning and benefiting from ARISE survival tips for independent living. These lessons teach young men and women how to manage their lives, handle a job interview, ask their boss for time off to deal with a personal crisis, and build a personal support system to help get them ahead and keep them there.

Of course, everyone makes mistakes. Newspapers across the country have daily corrections columns in which they list their errors. Young people are no different. ARISE staff know this and have taken it into account in the design and implementation of staff training programs. Even youths who have exhibited behavior far more serious than simple typos or caption errors can make 180-degree turns from chronic delinquency to a law-abiding lifestyle. Youths learn

that if they have erred, no matter how gravely, there is always another chance. By helping youths confront these realities, today's failure can truly be tomorrow's successes. Failure is not falling down, but staying down; hence, the name ARISE.

## How it Works

The founders of the ARISE Foundation, Susan and Edmund F. Benson, are tremendously dedicated to what they do — ARISE is their reason for being. They are motivated by their desire to help high-risk youths who do not possess the skills they need to live and work as law-abiding citizens in today's society.

So many incarcerated youths have let their anger get the better of them more than once so the first lesson the program teaches is anger management — how to harness the feelings and the inclinations to prevent and control the violence. ARISE life-skills instructors explain that no one wants to be friends with someone who cannot control his or her impulses. The youths learn techniques for conflict resolution and making personal choices, and learn to speak assertively without being considered aggressive. They become involved in dispute resolution training and nonviolent problem solving.

The key is in building self-esteem while also effectively passing on knowledge and information necessary to survive in the real world. All ARISE lessons are positive and forward-looking; no one is put down and no one is ridiculed, regardless of their inability to read, write or express their thoughts. Lessons are not "dumbed-down" versions of materials taught in regular public schools. In fact, Edmund Benson, himself an eighth-grade dropout, spent months listening to young offenders, learning what tools they needed and wanted to turn their lives around. What came to be known as ARISE is not purely an academically based effort. It is in fact addressing real issues this population is forced to deal with each and every day.

Instructors learn how to create a safe learning environment in which students are able to confide and admit their fears and shortcomings.

Instructors' attitudes and actions have a big impact on the knowledge and skills that the learners will develop, and as trained life-skills instructors, they actually play a major role in how well prepared these youths are upon their release. All of this directly impacts youths' ability to fulfill responsibilities in a society that demands law-abiding behavior from its citizens, no matter their age.

Youths all over have been touched by the uncanny ability of ARISE's materials to anticipate their needs and shortcomings. Since 1996, the program has touched about 2,000 to 3,000 youths weekly statewide in Florida, and throughout the country. ARISE also works with the Salvation Army, Arnold Schwarzenegger's Inner City Games, and Children and Family Services organizations.

ARISE equips youths with the skills to make good decisions and teaches literacy and important character themes, such as responsibility, respect, self-direction and self-control, in the process. Youths learn through interactive groups how their own decisions affect them and others, and that change requires effort, honesty and perseverance — three words that to some are completely foreign.

Young offenders exposed to well-developed and properly taught life-skills lessons will exhibit increases in pro-social behaviors and positive coping behaviors, decreases in aggressive behaviors, and an increased commitment to avoid high-risk behaviors.

## Staff Training

ARISE staff training is really the backbone of the program. Its trainers work closely with each facility to assess the staff's (including counselors, youth careworkers and case managers) educational and experience levels, and then tailor the program to meet the specific needs of each facility and its residents.

The combination of effective staff training and these life-management

lessons has been shown to reduce the incidence of misbehavior among participants, and lowers recidivism rates as well. In addition, staff-on-staff conflict and staff-on-youth friction are both decreased following ARISE training. Facility administrators also say that staff turnover is reduced and job satisfaction has increased.

ARISE has also developed a bona fide life-skills instructor certification program where direct care staff, who have taught ARISE material for 50 hours, can be tested and receive bronze certification. Those who have taught more than 100 hours are eligible to be tested for the silver level. And staff who have exceeded 150 hours, pass a written test and are observed by a program training specialist teaching a group can achieve the highest rating, the gold certification award.

Teaching ARISE group sessions benefits both staff and youths. During direct-care staff training, each trainee acquires knowledge of the subject matter. The trainee develops humanistic techniques and needed communication skills for guiding youth behavior, which ultimately contributes to a more positive learning environment. As the young men and women take more responsibility for their behavior, confrontations that interfere with teaching and learning are significantly reduced. Facility life becomes more manageable and meaningful, and successful community reintegration for youths becomes more realistic. Clearly, close interaction between life-skills instructors and youths promotes bonding and positive results.

It is important to note that normally, there is no additional cost involved in having direct care staff teach youths these life-management skills during the course of their normal work day. In this era of cutting budgets to the bone, ARISE is a win-win opportunity for even the most cost-conscious.

## A Clear Solution

Street toughs, drug addicts and those answering the call to criminal prosperity sooner or later end up in a secure facility. For some, this is a fearsome experience; for others, it is a second home. The job of juvenile justice professionals is to make sure that youths have access to resources that will help prevent them from returning to lives of crime once they are released. What better place to provide information that can change attitudes and lives than when these young men and women are housed in secure residential facilities.

Numerous studies have shown a correlation between correctional education and reduced recidivism rates. One, conducted by the Department of Education and cited in a 2001 *New York Times* article titled "Inmate Education is Found to Lower Risk of New Arrest" (and also cited in other mainstream publications), demonstrated a positive connection between inmates (in this case, all women) who participated in some sort of vocational training or classes and a lower recidivism rate (8 percent versus 30 percent) after three years. There are even reports of inmate waiting lists for classes and training. So not only do the lessons benefit incarcerated juveniles on a number of levels, but, when it is done right, they willingly participate and even enjoy the sessions. In many cases, education is the key to decreased criminal activity. Here, the solution is clear: ARISE-trained youths gain the tools necessary to become assets, not liabilities, to society.

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*Bert Zeegers is retired from the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice where he was the manager responsible for the ARISE Life-Management Skills program. Currently, there are 33 Florida facilities involved with the program.*

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