

Using a Strength-based Approach with Difficult Cases

In your work, you encounter youth who are resistant to working with you, or who seem unable or unwilling to share information about their interests or experiences.

The reasons for this resistance may include the following:

- Fear of the justice system and of what you might do to them
 - Distrust of authority figures (O.D.D.) or of people from a different cultural/ethnic/racial background
 - Their identity as a person who won't give in or who doesn't need anyone (especially adults)
- ❖ Fear: If youth see you as direct, fair, and open to seeing them as able to change, they will be more willing to participate with staff. With a strength-based approach, youth are active participants in setting their own goals and in creating a plan that is individualized to fit their interests.
- ❖ Distrust: A benefit of this approach is that you begin at the first appointment showing a personal interest in the youth and building the rapport that will help develop trust. By recognizing a youth's strengths, interests, and skills, you demonstrate that you view them as more than their negative behavior. In a strength-based approach, a person's cultural, ethnic or racial background is considered an asset, which can change a perceived barrier into a resource for supporting the youth.
- ❖ Tough or independent identity: The strengths approach is a good match for these youth because the focus is on identifying the youth's own strengths, goals, etc., which invests the youth with a considerable amount of control.

You also deal with some youth who have special circumstances due to their charges or other issues, for example:

- Youth who may be a danger to others or the community (e.g., a sex offender or violent offender)
 - Youth who may be seriously depressed or a danger to her/himself
 - Youth who are very young or who are developmentally or emotionally delayed
- ❖ Community safety issues: A strength-based approach does NOT mean that community safety issues are ignored or minimized. It is important that any community safety issues be adequately addressed as part of case planning. A strength-based approach is done in concert with community safety and other treatment goals so that the charge or behavior of concern is not the only part of the youth you focus on. A strength-based approach also helps prevent youth from incorporating an "offender" label into their identity.
- ❖ Depression: Sometimes mental health issues need to be addressed before the youth can focus on skill or competency development. Focusing on strengths, building on or developing pro-social activities, and identifying and developing support structures in the youth's life can have a positive impact on her/his mental health.

- ❖ Very young or developmentally/emotionally delayed: Youth who end up in the juvenile justice system who are very young or who function at a developmentally or emotionally young age may not be appropriate for traditional justice interventions. While these youth may be diverted in a variety of ways into appropriate services, the strength-based approach can be particularly useful for helping to identify the strengths of a youth's family or environment. A purposeful investigation of the people in a youth's life who can provide support and supervision could prevent future juvenile justice contacts.