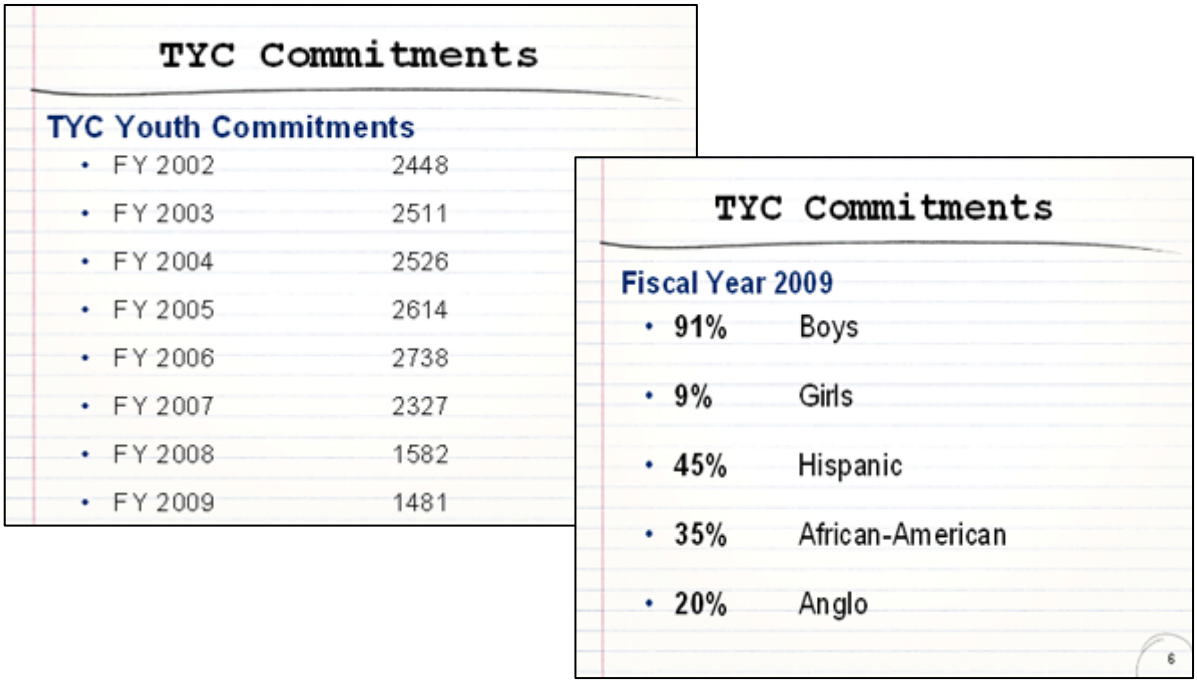
UNDERSTANDING TYC YOUTH CHAPTER 2

This chapter will help us to understand TYC Youth. This is one of the most important chapters of this training manual because it will hopefully shape your understanding of youth in our care.

The number of youth committed to TYC has been relatively stable each year with a notable decrease in Fiscal Year 2008.

In June 2007, Governor Perry signed Senate Bill 103 into law. This law brought about changes to the TYC population. As a result of this legislation, youth may no longer be committed to the Texas Youth Commission for a misdemeanor offense. The legislation also lowered the maximum age from 21 to 19. Both of these changes impacted the number of youth committed to TYC.



Each youth is committed as one of two types of sentence commitments — determinate & indeterminate.

A ***determinate sentence*** is one in which the judge sentences a youth to TYC for a specific period of time. If the youth does well, he/she can be released to parole. If he/she doesn't, TYC can request that the youth be transferred to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) to complete the sentence. Only a judge can make that determination.

Youth with a determinate sentence are known as Determinate Sentenced Offenders or simply Sentenced Offenders. Sentenced Offenders are generally our most serious offenders.

An ***indeterminate sentence*** is one in which the judge commits a youth to TYC for an unspecified period of time up to his or her 19th birthday. TYC decides the minimum amount of time the youth spends in a facility. These offenders cannot be sent to TDCJ.

Sentenced Offenders may be transferred to adult prison—the Texas Department of Criminal Justice—Institutions Division (TDCJ-ID) if they are at least 16 years of age and meet other policy requirements. They may also be released onto adult parole. It depends on their age and how well they are doing in the treatment program.

Single largest type of offense in the TYC population is **Burglary**.

For many, TYC is the end of the road. The next step could be adult prison or even death.

Even though we have limited commitments for these offenses, *all* of the youth in our custody have engaged in very serious criminal behavior. For many, TYC is the end of the road. The next step could be adult prison or even death.

You may be thinking, "What have I gotten myself into?"

The thought of working with this type of population can be very intimidating, even scary.

The good news is people can change. There is hope! We were all once teenagers! Helping the youth make positive changes can be extremely rewarding. Most of us came to TYC because we want to help the youth. In order to help the youth change, you must understand their issues.

The teenage stage of development presents many challenges.

Rebelliousness is "normal" for teenagers. Many of the challenging behaviors of TYC youth are normal for their stage of development. Many theorists hold that humans go through different levels of normal development.

Erik Erickson is a highly-respected pioneer in the field of psychology. In the 1950's, he developed the Psychosocial Stages of Development which is a widely-respected theory about the stages of development. **The "big question" for teens is "Who Am I?"**

Characteristics of adolescence:

- ***Acceptance by peers and friends*** — teens try to figure out where they fit in; this may mean that they attempt to join certain cliques to create their own sense of identity apart from their parents.

- ***Independence***—teenagers begin to make their own decisions and define their own set of principles. This is an important step toward becoming a self-sufficient adult. Of course, teens still need the guidance and support of adults, because there is still a lot they don't know (even though they don't always realize it.) In the video, some of the youth found it weird that anyone would want to hang out with Mom.

- ***Sexuality*** —hormones are raging and teens are becoming increasingly aware of their sexuality. Their bodies are rapidly changing, including weight and height. They are becoming more aware of their bodies and sex. Masturbation is a common occurrence. Girls have issues related to menstruation ranging from cramps to moodiness.

- ***Achievement*** —during the adolescent years, youth begin to think about their future aspirations. They develop goals about what they want to do in life in terms of family and career. They develop their own notion about what "success" means. The youth in the video seemed to value achieving at basketball, video games, and poker.

- ***Cognitive Skills*** —during these years we improve our abstract thinking skills—so we can understand concepts we can't see, hear or touch. Examples are: empathy, trust, faith. Logic and reasoning skills are also improving. They begin to think more deeply about things. As teens understand more about the world, they may develop causes (ex. Animal rights activist). Such "causes" are part of identity development.

- ***Body Image*** —during adolescence, changes in the body can sometimes lead to insecurity. Things like weight gain, acne, breast development, facial hair, increased sweat gland activity can all be causes for concern. It is not uncommon for youth to be preoccupied with their appearance. They are dealing with changes in their appearance at the same time that they are forming an identity or trying to fit in. This can be stressful.

The point is that adolescence is a difficult stage of development. Teenagers have a lot of issues hitting them at once.

TYC youth are no different in that perspective.

There are certain factors that statistically make it harder for youth to stay on the right track. These factors are known as "risk factors."

RISK FACTORS

Risk Factors

Risk factors do NOT ***cause delinquency,*** but research shows that risk factors increase the likelihood. Generally speaking, the more risk factors one has, the more likely one will become delinquent. Again, risk factors do NOT *cause* a person to become delinquent. It's not that simple. The development of delinquency is complex and differs from person to person. There are youth out there with many risk factors that never engage in delinquent acts.

There is value to exploring the youth's risk factors, however. Risk factors help us gain insight into how the youth came to be the person they are today and identify what areas we can focus on to help them change.

Risk factors do not just apply to TYC youth; they apply to EVERYONE. As we review risk factors, think about which risk factors relate to you or your children.

For purposes of this training, let's review examples of risk factors as they relate to 5 categories: ***Individual, Family, Community, Social, and School.***

Individual Risk Factors

Individual risk factors are characteristics about a person that may create challenges. These are some examples:

- Mental illness
- Low IQ
- Hyperactivity
- Early anti-social behavior

Here are TYC stats related to Individual risk factors (FY 09):

- 37% had serious mental health problems
- 47% were chemically addicted
- 85% had IQs below 100
- 5% were English language learners

According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (a division of the Department of Justice), studies show that **early antisocial behavior** is one of the strongest **individual risk factors** for future delinquency. This means that children involved in delinquent activities prior to age 13 are more likely to be chronic offenders.

Family Risk Factors

Family Risk Factors are characteristics about the family that statistically increase the likelihood of delinquency. Seeing factors like “divorce” or “single mother” is scary. These are characteristics that apply to many of us! Remember, risk factors don’t cause delinquency. However, because there is a correlation between risk factors and increased risk for delinquency, we need to help youth manage family risk factors.

Related TYC youth statistics (FY 09):

- 77% have parents who were never married, are divorced or are separated.
- 38% had a documented history of being abused or neglected
- 57% came from low-income homes
- 50% had families with histories of criminal behavior
- 12% had family members with mental impairments

ASK YOURSELF: Why do *you* think that coming from a family with a history of criminal behavior is considered to be a risk factor?

There isn’t *one* correct answer. It’s probably a combination of things that are different for each person:

- Negative role modeling
- Pressure to be accepted by family
- Learned behaviors
- Criminal behaviors readily accepted and/or encouraged
- Criminal lifestyle of family/parents leading to abuse or neglect

Community Risk Factors

Community Risk Factors refer to characteristics in the neighborhood believed to correlate with increased risk, such as:

- Impoverished neighborhoods
- High crime neighborhoods
- Easy access to weapons
- Disorganized neighborhood

A “disorganized neighborhood” refers to a neighborhood in which families are isolated from one another or otherwise disconnected coupled with a lack of social networks or organizations such as crime watch groups, litter pick-up volunteers, recreation centers, etc.

Social Risk Factors

Social Risk Factors can include influence from negative peers.

During adolescence, youth are vulnerable to peer pressure because of the desire to be accepted by others.

The power of peer pressure is why association with delinquent and/or aggressive peers is a risk factor for youth. Consider that 40% of TYC youth

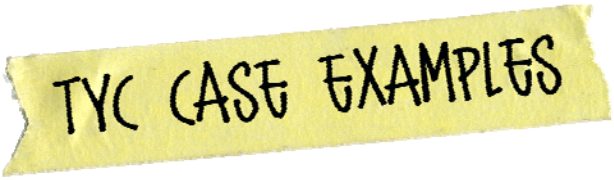
admitted during the intake process that they are gang members (FY 08). Some believe that percentage is much higher since not all youth admit to being in a gang and others will join a gang while serving their time in TYC.

School Risk Factors

School Risk Factors are present in a large percentage of our youth. School plays a key role in rehabilitation. Many TYC youth are several grade levels behind when they come to us. Though the average age of TYC youth is 16, the youth are typically several years behind in school.

Other related TYC youth statistics (FY09):

- Median reading level was 6th grade
- Median math level was 5th grade
- 36% were eligible for Special Education services

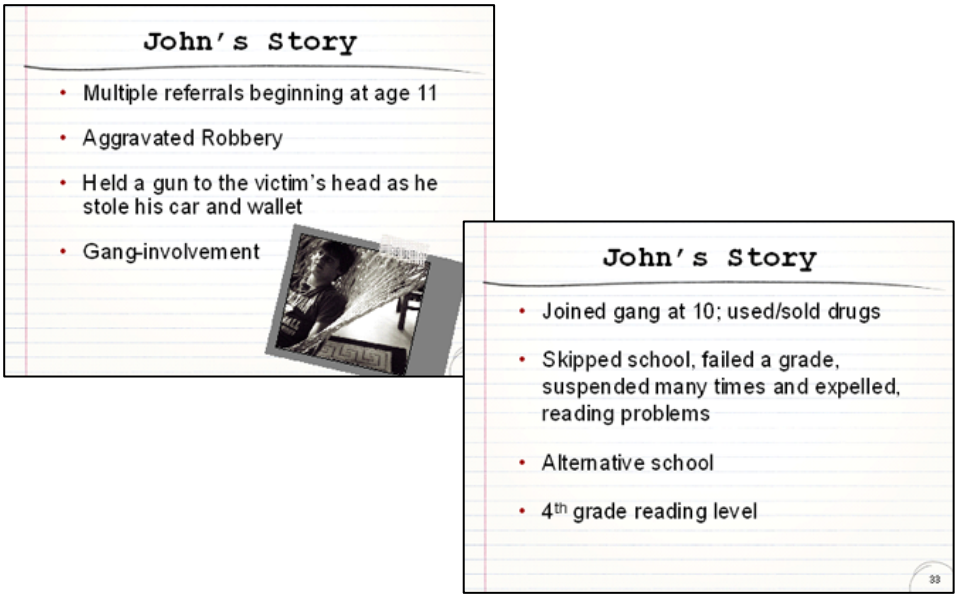


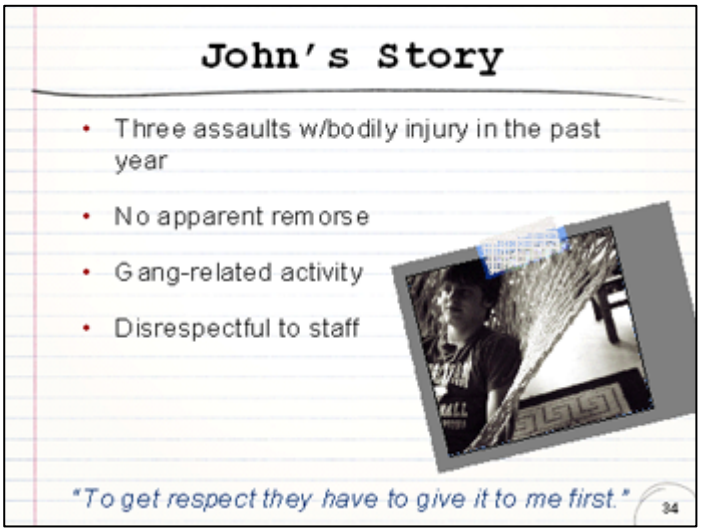
Case Examples

As you have learned, the development of delinquency is complex. We see this complexity in the lives of many TYC youth. TYC youth, like everyone else, have issues "below the surface" that impact their behavior. As human beings, our experiences impact who we are today—in both good ways and bad.

Below are two fictitious TYC cases, focusing on some of the risk factors "below the surface." While these particular cases are not real, we used examples from other real cases to give you a realistic view of the issues our youth face.

John's Story





Meet **John**, a 15-year old boy committed to TYC for Aggravated Robbery. John held a gun to his victim's head and demanded his car and wallet. John is a gang member and has been involved in gang activity in the past. In fact, he is no newcomer to criminal activity.

John first joined the gang at 10 years old, and soon after began abusing alcohol and marijuana. At some point, he sold marijuana as well.

Though he has an average IQ, he skipped so much school that he failed the 6th grade.

He was known to get in fights in school and he was disrespectful to teachers. He was suspended several times and subsequently expelled. At the time of his commitment, he was enrolled in an alternative school. Records indicate that he has a 4th grade reading level.

John as been in TYC for a year and already he has 3 assaults on his record. Each assault appeared to be gang-related as he claimed that some of the other guys were disrespecting his gang. Therefore, he is not remorseful.

He is also disrespectful to some staff. He has had several incidents of cursing staff and is generally argumentative. He claims he is only that way when he is disrespected.

John's family was very poor and moved a lot when he was young because they could not pay the rent. They sometimes lived in abandoned buildings. He mainly grew up in a neighborhood in Houston where the median income is $7,600 and 62% of the residents live in poverty. It is the lowest-income neighborhood in the city.

There were gangs and drugs in the neighborhood and he often heard gunshots at night. As a little boy, he was afraid a lot.

Not only was his neighborhood dangerous, so was his home. His father was in jail most of his life for aggravated robbery and his mother lived with a lot of different men—some of whom beat her. She also used drugs.

Once, he pointed a gun at his step-father to make him stop hitting his mother. He was only seven. The stepfather also abused him, beating him often with an extension cord.

School was also hard for him and he frequently felt stupid. He had learning disabilities in reading and had trouble processing verbal and written information.

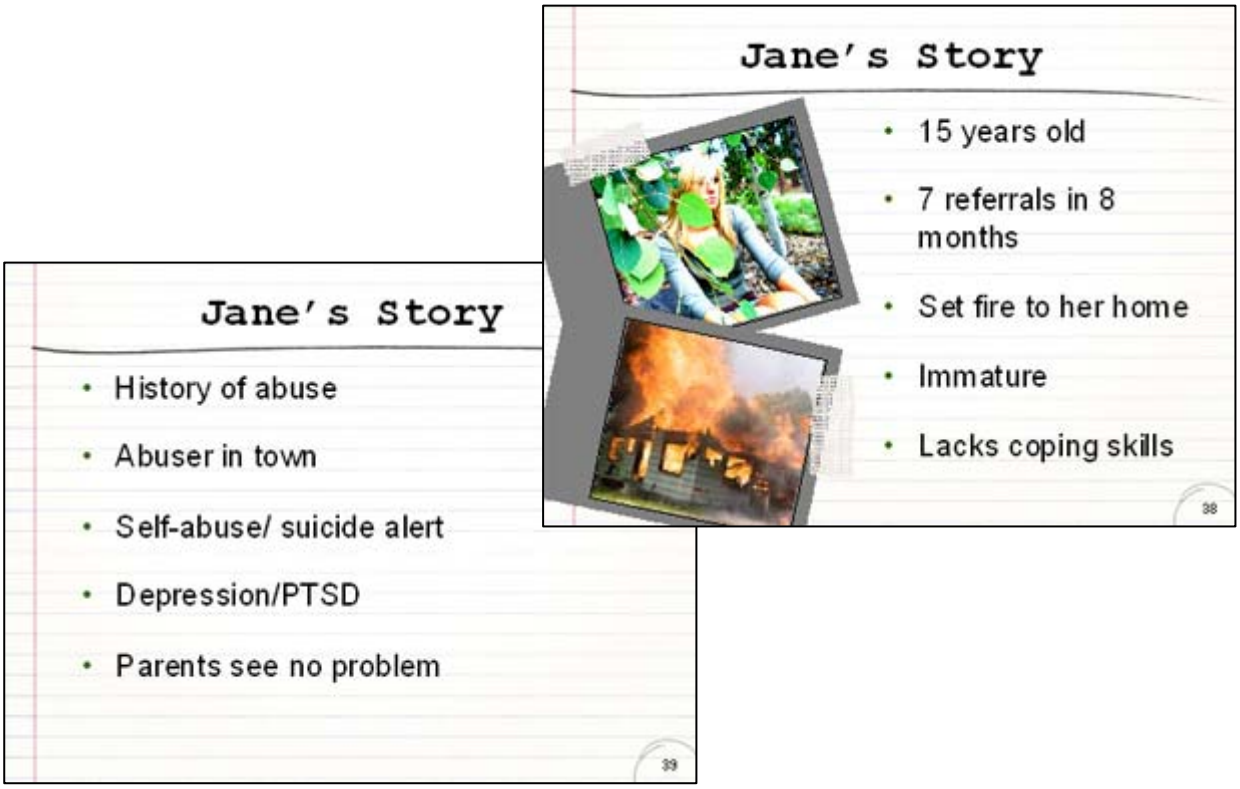
John didn't go to school much after 6th grade. By that time, he was involved in a gang and using drugs. He was also fighting a lot at school and was suspended and expelled. He was attending an alternative school at the time of his commitment.

ASK YOURSELF: How do you think John's background could impact his behavior?

Possibilities:

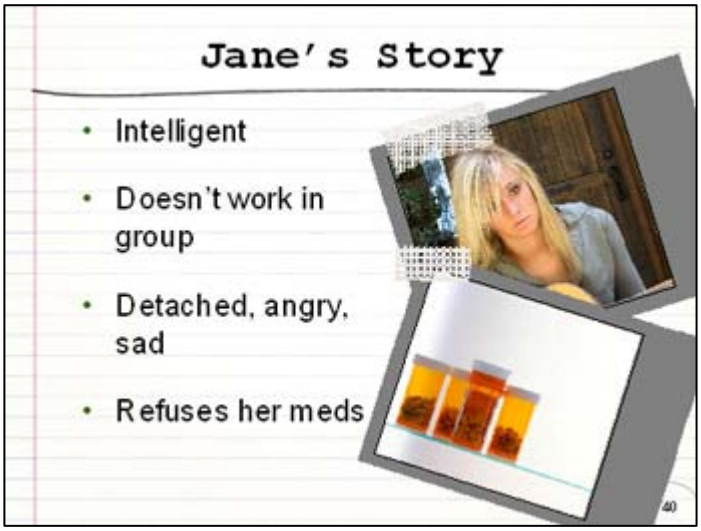
- Authority issues (especially with men because of abusive step father)
- Sensitive about being disrespected (based on abusive past)
- Gang involvement to feel safe and secure (based on abusive past and unsafe surroundings)
- Avoidance of school
- Trying to cover up reading issues
- Value money or status (based on being poor and homeless)
- Insecure, inadequate (based on learning disability and/or feeling unloved)

Jane's Story



Let me tell you about **Jane**, a 15-year-old Caucasian girl. Currently, Jane has been in TYC for over 10 months. Jane has had 7 referrals to Juvenile Probation starting 8 months ago.

She was committed to TYC for setting fire to her home, though she won't or can't say why. She's been described by her probation officer as emotionally immature and lacking coping skills. They also state that Jane's family has not held her accountable for her actions. They make excuses for her.



Although Jane denies any history of abuse, there was a reference in her record that indicated that she was molested by a male cousin when she was little. In fact, this same male cousin recently moved near Jane, so she saw him often. Since he's moved to town, she has been getting into trouble. She was on suicide alert status at juvenile detention. She has a prior history of cutting on her arms with sharp objects. Jane also has poured perfume on her hands and set them on fire. Jane also poured accelerant on rats, set them on fire and then threw them on furniture.

Records indicate that Jane suffers from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Her parents however think that Jane is fine, she is just going through growing pains and testing limits.

Her adjustment at TYC has been poor. Jane is extremely intelligent, but she does not do her schoolwork. She doesn't participate in group, either. She seems detached and numb. She has been prescribed an antidepressant but she refuses her meds several times a week.

Jane has had quite a few Incident Reports for disruption of program, danger to others, refusal to follow staff instructions, and threat of harm to self. She seems angry, lost and sad. She denies that she is suicidal. Though she seems to get along with her family, she never calls home even when the call is free.

ASK YOURSELF: What might be some of the issues that will require follow-up by the Case Manager, Psychologist or Psychiatrist?

Possibilities:

- Medication compliance
- Anger at parents
- Connection between Jane's delinquency and her cousin

- Learning how to express her feelings appropriately
- Learning how to cope in a healthy manner
- Self-hate issues
- Parent's denial

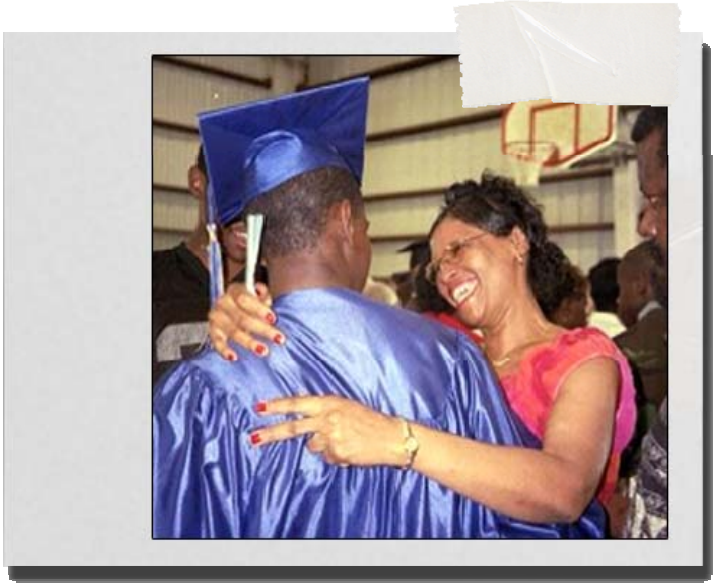
Despite the complex lives of the youth in our care, we believe that the youth can make the changes necessary to be law-abiding citizens.

Research has shown that we can lessen the impact of risk factors, thus helping youth to succeed!

Protective factors are those things that mediate or moderate the effect of exposure to risk factors. In other words, they are things that "protect" a person from the risk factors.

With support, youth can build on the protective factors, thus minimizing the impact of the risk factors.

There is hope for all the youth in our care!



Protective Factors

There are protective factors in each of the five categories we discussed previously: Individual, Family, School, Community and Social.

Individual protective factors

Individual protective factors are those things about a person that helps them cope and succeed. Being motivated and optimistic are protective factors. When we teach youth skills like how to manage stress, solve problems or get along with others we helping to build protective factors.

Family protective factors

Families can also be protective factors. Examples would be positive parental role models and parents who support and encourage youth.

School protective factors

Success in school is connected with lower recidivism rates. Being committed to school and attending a safe school environment are considered protective factors.

Community protective factors

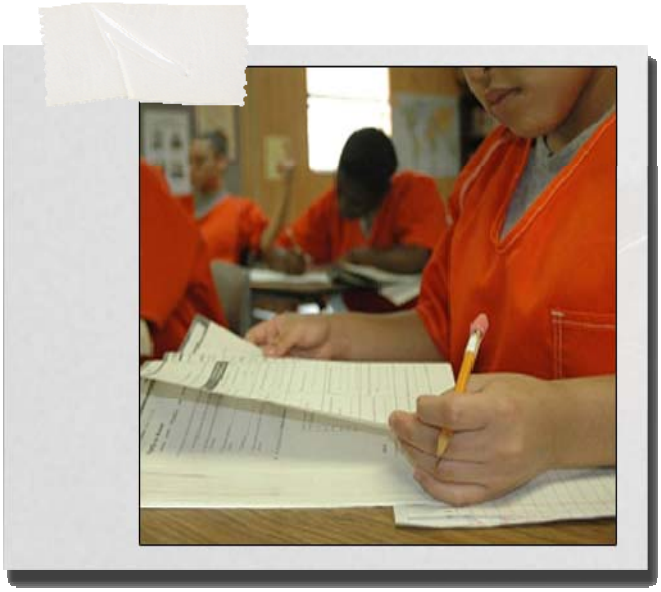
As far as the community, neighborhoods that are safe and contain support systems and activities for families are also protective factors. These may include, churches, recreation centers (YMCA), sports, safe parks, crime watch groups, drug-free zones, and so on.

Social protective factors

And lastly, one's social group can be a protective factor. True friends are a part of a person's support system. Friends who believe in being pro-social and model a positive lifestyle is also important. Remember, teenagers are seeking belonging and identity. Their peer group can have a big influence.

WHAT YOU CAN DO...

What You Can Do



Promoting sense of safety - youth who feel safe can focus on making changes instead of having to "watch their back." Safety must come first.

Providing structure - when things are chaotic youth don't know what to expect. Also, a chaotic environment equals a lack of control and an unsafe environment. If you walk onto a chaotic dorm, it won't feel safe.

Providing positive social norms - basically we have rules that we expect the youth to follow. Rules help the youth to live in a respectful manner of others as a member of the community.

ASK YOURSELF: What "rules" do we have in the community that promotes respect for safety and other people?
(Ex: Don't drive & drive, don't hitchhike, wear seatbelts, lock doors at night)

Provide opportunities to belong - remember that teenagers want to belong. We can provide positive ways to establish belonging like sports groups, campus tour guides, community service, employment, etc.

Establish rapport - you have to establish rapport with the youth in order to earn their trust. Many teens are distrustful of adults. How you interact with them can either help them or hurt them.

Model appropriate behavior - the youth will be constantly watching you. They will be familiar with your attitude and behavior. You are role models whether you intend to be or not. If you are doing or saying things we don't allow the youth to do, you will lose credibility. "Do as I say, not as I do" never works.

Give responsibility and challenges - many of the youth have not had many opportunities for success prior to coming to TYC. You will find that the youth have a lot of potential and creativity that is untapped. Encourage youth to draw, write poetry, have leadership responsibilities on the dorm, or play sports.

Provide positive reinforcement - our youth have heard how bad they are all of their lives. If we want them to change, we need to give them praise and encouragement. Reinforce even the small changes they make. Remember, no one changes overnight. Sometimes it will seem like they are going 3 steps forward and 2 steps backward. That's okay. Change is a process, not an event. Tell them you are proud, or point out their accomplishments along the way.

Coordinate family, school and community programs upon release - this is the case managers' responsibility for the most part. In order to build protective factors, we have to make sure the youth has support upon their release. Examples include drug treatment, training programs, work, family counseling and reintegration planning.

THANK YOU AND GOOD LUCK!