The Seven Challenges® for a Juvenile Justice Population

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The Seven Challenges is a comprehensive counseling program for adolescents with substance abuse problems, listed in SAMHSA’s National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP). It is well suited for work with youth in the juvenile justice system and has been widely used in the community and in secure facilities, all across the country. The program is developmentally appropriate: Instead of dictating behavior to youth, it presents a decision-making model and helps young people make their own informed decisions about their direction in life and use of drugs.

In addition to drug problems, most youth in the juvenile justice system have co-occurring psychological problems, situational problems, and an assortment of life skills deficits. To address those diverse needs, The Seven Challenges program is holistic. Counselors serve as problem solving partners with youth – helping them deal with their underlying problems -- and teaching them life skills so they can have a life worth living without drugs. Once prepared in this way, youth are in a position to make informed decisions to quit using drugs.

The Seven Challenges program is fundamentally different from mainstream approaches to drug treatment that engage in what we call the “mad rush for abstinence.” With the mad rush, counselors talk incessantly about the harm of drugs, try to make youth decide to quit using, or coerce them into quitting, and then focus almost exclusively on relapse prevention. In response, youth typically lie or resist and fight back. Counseling in this manner begins to look like a series of arguments or a disingenuous encounter in which youth “tell the adults what they want to hear.” Eventually counselors teach youth who have not honestly decided to be drug free, how to be drug free. Some youth actually choose to quit using, but when the counseling narrowly focuses on the drug-use behavior without fully addressing the issues and needs that motivate the behavior, young people try to quit, but often fail. For them, this becomes yet another failure experience.

With The Seven Challenges program we start where youth are “at,” not where we wish they might be, not where they might pretend to be (ready and willing to make honest decisions to change with regard to drugs -- and prepared for success in such changes), and not where they might be for only a fleeting moment in time (for example, after a drug crisis or while standing in front of the drug court judge). We avoid the pitfalls of locking horns with youth in a power
struggle or of eliciting dishonest responses. Rather, we consider the stage of change of the youth we serve and help them through a decision-making process.

It should be noted, however, that many youth who are admitted into drug counseling services are mandated to be there by probation, parole, or drug court judges. Although they may be in the early stages of change with regard to their drug use, there is extensive external pressure to maintain abstinence. Seven Challenges counselors will be clear that it is not their job to make youth quit – that is not the job of a counselor. However, counselors will also help youth understand clearly that they – the youth -- are under external pressure to be abstinent and ask youth what they want to do about their situation. Whether they believe they have a problem with drugs or not, most court-involved youth recognize the need to stop using drugs because of external pressures. If they initially fail to see this, Seven Challenges counselors help them understand the potential for problems with the courts. Most youth will agree that they want to quit. In response, we offer them what we callCourtesy Relapse PreventionTM. That is, we wholeheartedly support them in their effort to remain drug free. However, we do not make the very common mistake of confusing an impulse to quit (motivated by external pressure or by some other sort of recent crisis) with a fully informed and fully motivated decision to quit. When a person has made a fully informed, fully motivated decision to quit, and when that person has been prepared for success, teaching relapse prevention would be the appropriate response. When the decision and motivation are meager, as is often the case with youth, we work on two levels. On one level we fully support abstinence through Courtesy Relapse Prevention. On another level, we recognize that the decision to change is fragile, so we back up and start at the beginning. We walk the individual through the decision-making process. We strive for honest engagement and work for decisions that are fully informed and firm. We build a foundation for long term success. We help youth understand what needs they have been satisfying, or trying to satisfy, through their drug use. We help them solve problems and learn skills so they can meet their needs in healthier ways.

Incorporated in The Seven Challenges is a rich array of materials, including a 120-page book of readings based on the words of young people and nine Seven Challenges Journals in which counselors and youth engage in a written exchange with one another, called Supportive Journaling. Also there are diplomas for youth, posters, and a variety of other supportive materials. The Seven Challenges Manual and a training DVD are provided to support on-site training in the program. The Seven Challenges Activity Book is a resource for counselors. The Seven Challenges – Brief model is used in short term detention and in school settings, where counseling time is limited.

A variety of features of The Seven Challenges have made it particularly attractive to people working in a juvenile justice system. The program steps away from the aggressive approaches that breed defiance with this typically resistant client population. The Seven Challenges is not a control model trying to make youth quit using drugs. Rather, it is relationship-based and therefore particularly well suited for engaging oppositional and resistant youth. Program participants learn how to make safe, respectful relationships, an important life skill for individuals in the juvenile justice system. Counselors are taught how to be powerful without engaging in power struggles. We have found, too, that many male offenders who posture tough
and do not want to look “soft,” are willing to disclose feelings and life situations in written *Journals* that they would not disclose in face-to-face sessions.

The Seven Challenges is a strength building, empowerment model – in contrast to a deficit model. Youth are encouraged to believe in themselves and to take power over their own decisions and own lives. This is developmentally appropriate. Instead of sessions focusing on controlling youth or *making* them quit using drugs, youth are engaged by teaching them to “work” on the issues that matter most to them. Goals are incremental and attainable so youth feel that they can be successful as they move through the stages of change. This is important to a population that has often experienced failure and may suffer from a fear of failure.

In research studies using the Global Appraisal of Individual Needs (GAIN), The Seven Challenges has been shown to be particularly effective in the treatment of trauma and other co-occurring mental health problems prevalent in youth in the juvenile justice system.

The Seven Challenges program was originally developed by working with a culturally diverse group of youth and has been used effectively with youth from diverse backgrounds. The program places great emphasis on responsibility. Youth are helped to put their lives in context – to understand the impact of their environment upon them -- so they do not feel shame or engage in excessive self blame. On the other hand, they are helped to see their own responsibility for their behavior. They cannot use their own circumstances as an excuse for delinquent behavior.

The decision making model of The Seven Challenges program works well with youth on probation, on parole, or in drug courts, because the counseling component helps youth weigh the costs versus the benefits of behavioral choices, and the courts monitor behavior and hold youth accountable for what they do. The distinctive roles combine well. Youth can work on The Seven Challenges in both secure settings and in the community, with continuity of services built into the model for youth in the juvenile justice system who may move from one setting to the other.

For those who work behind the fence, specialized training is provided for supportive use of the program by youth care workers, to help them understand and integrate The Seven Challenges process in their daily interactions with youth.

The Seven Challenges was developed with a culturally diverse group of youth and has been used effectively with the juvenile justice population in diverse settings and from diverse backgrounds. In sum, it is a program to help youth realistically and holistically confront their drug and co-occurring problems so that they can live meaningful, pleasurable, and socially productive lives.