

# Best Practices for Effective Correctional Programs

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The last 3 decades have seen an increasing focus on the need to evaluate the effectiveness of programs aimed at reducing many types of social problems, including those that attempt to reduce criminal behavior through the use of offender rehabilitation interventions (McGuire, 2001). In fact, since Martinson’s (1974) review of the evidence on correctional programming, which famously claimed that “nothing works”, over 30 different reviews of the scientific literature have demonstrated that a number of such programs do indeed work to reduce recidivism (see for instance, Gendreau, 1996 and Losel, 2001 for summaries of this body of research). This large body of research has also clearly demonstrated that to be truly effective, correctional programming must include several key elements. This research brief examines those key concepts that demonstrate the components of an effective program.

## The Risk-Need-Responsivity Model (RNR)

The Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model is derived from core principles that have been shown to enhance the overall effectiveness of correctional treatment programs (see Bonta and Andrews, 2007). The use of the RNR model is highly effective in treatment, as it addresses the risks of reoffending for the offender, the needs of offenders that must be targeted in treatment and the style of treatment that works best depending each offenders’ risk level and need (Dowden and Andrews, 2004; Bonta and Andrews, 2007; Bonta et al., 2010; Taxman et al., 2015).

## The Risk Principle

The **Risk Principle** of RNR refers to the requirement of matching the offender with the treatment intensity that best fits their risk level of reoffending. Higher risk offenders often exhibit a number of issues that increase their risk of reoffending and these must be addressed with more intensive interventions. Risk level itself must be deter-

mined using an empirically-validated risk assessment tool.

**High risk offenders:** These offenders benefit the most from higher level intensity treatment. Specifically for such individuals treatment content needs to be more rigorous and often focused on multiple problem domains (drugs, housing, criminal attitudes and associates,

etc.), the duration of the intervention is longer, and the frequency of exposure to needed services is higher for these individuals.

**Low risk offenders:** Low risk offenders, on the other hand, benefit from the receiving more minimal exposure to treatment. It is important to note that low risk offenders receiving

high intensity treatment exposure tend to resort back to pro-criminal behaviors. This demonstrates the importance of assessing the risk level of each offender before being exposed to treatment.

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## The Need Principle

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*The **Need Principle*** refers to the requirement that correctional programming address the criminogenic (e.g., crime-related) needs of the offender. Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of several need factors, including substance abuse, maladaptive cognitive and emotional processes, pro-criminal values and attitudes, environmental influ-

ences (crime-ridden neighborhoods), and negative family and peer influences. Effective correctional programming also targets criminogenic needs which are dynamic (i.e., changeable, such as current drug use) rather than those that are static (e.g., prior criminal behavior cannot be changed). As with the Risk Principle, effective correctional interventions that attempt to address

dynamic, criminogenic needs must also be targeted at individual offenders, based on the results derived from a scientifically-validated assessment tool. Periodic re-assessment of offenders' needs and ongoing case planning that follows from this assessment is also needed in order to modify the delivery of services as initial need areas are resolved and new issues arise over time.

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## The Responsivity Principle

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*The **Responsivity Principle*** is used in correctional programming to match the skills and learning abilities of each offender to the format in which the intervention is offered. In many cases, offenders benefit from participating in programs which provide specific, structured skills-building formats, especially those that incorporate cognitive-behavioral and social learning approaches, such as efforts to increase offenders' awareness of their internal cognitive and emotional processes, and to promote the use of newly acquired skills through the use of role play, for instance.

General: General responsivity refers to social learning elements of treatment such as cognitive behavioral interventions, which have been shown to be relatively effective work for many types of offenders, regardless of their offense(s). This type of therapy is focused on altering maladaptive behaviors and attitudes to promote more prosocial behaviors. Here, reward and punishment systems are also utilized along with problem solving techniques to positively influence offender behavior and coping abilities.

Specific: Specific responsivity refers to tailored treatment based on the skills and ability of each offender. Role playing, group interactions, and cognitive restructuring are a few of the treatment methods that are personalized to fit the strengths, personality and demographic traits of an offender in a correctional program.

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## Effective Program Components

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Effective offender treatment programs require considerable attention in their conceptualization, design and implementation, as well as in the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of their operation and effectiveness. Outlined below are several essential components for the delivery and maintenance of effective correctional programming (Gendreau, 1996; McGuire, 2001; Dowden and Andrews, 2004; Bonta and Andrews, 2007; Bonta et al., 2010; Taxman et al., 2015).

**Model of Change:** Effective programs should be derived from a clearly defined, evidence-based theory that details the ways in which treatment will positively impact criminal behavior of the specific target population for the program. Here, program functions and outcomes are established to address the risk factors and needs of the offenders in order to achieve the goals set forth by the program. The program's conceptual theory (e.g., *how* it will change offender behavior) should be clearly stated in this stage of program planning

**Dynamic Risk Factors:** Effective programs should seek to identify offender risk factors that may lead to criminal behaviors (i.e. – Criminogenic risks: criminal history, family and peer influences, pro criminal attitudes, substance abuse, etc.). Appropriate programming should then be delivered to modify or eliminate these risk factors, in order to reduce likelihood of reoffending. Assessment of criminogenic risks (and needs, described further below) must include the use of validated assessment tools that can clearly identify relevant offender risks and needs to be addressed.

**Range of Targets:** Effective correctional programs recognize that offenders typically exhibit a wide range of risk and need factors which increase their likelihood of reoffending (substance abuse, lack of stable housing, poor educational attainment and lack of job skills). Multimodal programs which can address these complex and often interrelated need areas are generally more effective than programs which are more limited in focus (e.g., drug treatment alone).

**Effective methods:** Effective correctional programs make use of scientifically validated treatment techniques. For example, cognitive behavioral interventions, which attempt to increase the offender's recognition of how thoughts and emotional reactions can lead to anti-social behaviors, and train offenders to take responsibility for monitoring and changing these thoughts, have repeatedly been demonstrated to be effective.

**Skill Oriented:** Effective correctional programs focus not only on the risk and need factors which increase potential re-offending risk, but also attend to offenders' existing strengths and skills. Correctional programs must target and work to augment these existing areas of skill within the offender. Treatment interventions should attempt to improve critical thinking, problem-solving and coping skills that influence positive pro-social behaviors. Treatment founded upon offender skill is strategically used to promote long term success in abstaining from pro-criminal attitudes and behaviors.

**Intensity, Sequencing, Duration:** Effective correctional programs tailor the frequency, nature, and intensity of treatment services to individual needs. Low risk offenders should receive minimal exposure to treatment while high risk individuals will need a treatment plan that incorporates higher levels of exposure, likely to multimodal, longer term services. The overall objective of treatment must also be specified as part of individualized treatment plans for different types of offenders. Intensity, sequencing, and duration also require program components to remain flexible in order to meet the variation of needs in offenders. Assessment tools are useful when determining the amount, type, style, and length of exposure to behavioral interventions needed to appropriately address the risk level of the offenders in the program.

**Selection of Offenders:** Effective correctional programs clearly identify the specific types of offenders who will be the target of the intervention and outline how that program's services will specifically impact the likelihood of recidivism among these offenders (e.g., *how* will this program change the offender's criminogenic risk and need factors?). Keeping this program theory in mind is vital when selecting offenders for a given correctional program. The placement of offenders in the program should be based on explicitly stated target population and goals of the program.

## RESEARCH IN ACTION

**Engagement and Participation:** Effective correctional programs are designed to encourage offenders to participate and engage with other participants and program staff. Reflecting the responsivity principle of RNR, engagement and participation enhances the effectiveness of behavioral interventions because they are ideally matched with the learning abilities and skills of the offender, regardless of the type criminal behaviors being modified.

**Case Management:** Effective correctional programs often utilize an identified case manager who oversees offender's treatment plans, which are derived from the results of a formal, validated risk/need assessment tool. Case management is done to ensure continuity of care and to ensure that offenders are following the phases of treatment necessary to reduce recidivism. Effective correctional programs incorporate repeated risk/needs assessment and ongoing case management that includes updating of the treatment plan based on changes in needs over time.

**Ongoing Monitoring:** Effective correctional programs maintain systems to gather data on the delivery of program components (e.g., how many drug treatment sessions are offered weekly at the facility) and offender participation (e.g., how many sessions participants attend) in order to continually assess whether the program is being delivered as it was intended in the original program design process. Strategies of the utilization of this monitoring data must also be devised so that the program personnel can proactively incorporate this information into their decision making at both the administrative and staff level. Monitoring program progress in this manner is essential for maintaining program integrity over time and ensuring that the intended results are being produced from the program's activities.

**Communicate Expectations:** Effective correctional programs have systems in place to clearly communicate to participants what is expected of them, what the consequences for non-compliance are, and also what the rewards for meeting behavioral expectations are. Behavioral contracts for instance, clearly define the rules and regulations of programs so that offenders are aware of what is expected of them. These contracts also create offender awareness of the roles and authorities of program staff, and can be used to improve the lines of communication between staff and participants, by minimizing the potential for misunderstanding about expectations and outcomes.

**Ensuring Compliance:** Effective correctional programs make use of a mix of sanctions in response to non-compliance, as well as rewards when expectations and program milestones are met. Sanctions and rewards are valuable in correctional programs because they increase responsibility and accountability for one's actions. If an offender fails to follow program guidelines (i.e. – failing a drug test, using profanity, missing a session, etc.) graduated sanctions should be utilized to discipline the offender without necessarily dismissing them from the program at the first failure. In many correctional programs, repeated drug testing is used to hold offenders accountable. Other forms of increased supervision are also commonly used, especially in community-based programs, and may also be heightened as a form of graduated sanction and as a means to ensuring compliance. Equally important is the need to reward offenders who meet program expectations to foster their motivation to complete the program. Both sanctions and rewards must be delivered in a firm, fair and transparent manner by program staff, so that offenders realize that these consequences result solely from the behavior that they themselves are responsible for.

**Evaluation:** Effective correctional programs engage in regular evaluations of their program operations and expected outcomes. Evaluation of program operations should be performed to ensure that the program theory is being followed, while evaluation of program outcomes will help ensure that these services continue to have their desired impact on relevant offender outcomes (e.g., recidivism, drug relapse). Beyond the specific program itself, credible program evaluations can help inform like-minded efforts by other agencies to deliver effective correctional programs, as well as identify components of the program that may benefit from adjustments to improve program function and overall effectiveness.

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**[Additional Correctional Programming Resources](#)**

**[www.cmitonline.org](http://www.cmitonline.org)**

**[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)**

**[www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov)**

**[www.crimesolutions.gov](http://www.crimesolutions.gov)**

**[www.blueprintsprograms.com](http://www.blueprintsprograms.com)**

**[www.gmuace.org](http://www.gmuace.org)**

**[nicic.gov/theprinciplesofeffectiveinterventions](http://nicic.gov/theprinciplesofeffectiveinterventions)**

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