



APRIL 2021

Growth-Focused Case Management: *Using Case Planning to Involve Youth in a Growth Experience that Supports Desistance from Offending*

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose of This Practice Brief

Forming a positive identity is the central developmental task of adolescence.¹ It is what youth do in order to “grow up” or increase in maturity. It is also a primary way in which youthful offenders desist offending.² Therefore, an evidence-based strategy – which also protects community safety and respects victims’ rights – is to develop and manage case plans with youth that facilitate forming a positive identity with which offending is no longer compatible.³ The purpose of this brief is to present how the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (juvenile probation) embraced a new method of case planning that proactively integrated positive identity formation into their probation experience in order to achieve better outcomes for their youth on supervision.

Effects of a Negative Justice System Experience

The youth’s enormous developmental task of forming an identity comes with a new set of higher needs called “growth needs.”⁴ Among such needs are forming a purpose, making life meaningful, attaining status or worth, and joy. With brains

primed to take risks,⁵ they search for experiences to satisfy their higher needs. Consequently, frustration of these needs has detrimental effects that delay or stop identity formation.⁶ Renowned psychologist, Abraham Maslow, theorized long ago that delayed or blocked identity growth causes delinquency. He was correct (see *Illustration 1: Identity Confusion*). All too often, justice system involvement is an experience that frustrates growth needs which undermines positive identity formation⁷ and, inadvertently, increases offending. Becoming more aware of this link between identity and delinquency is the next frontier of advancement for working with youth on community supervision.⁸

In a community-based sample of 503 boys followed from childhood into early adulthood, exposure to the justice system increased subsequent criminogenic risk factors.⁹ A review of 29 experimental studies found that court-processed youth were significantly more likely to reoffend within a 12-month period compared to those who were diverted.¹⁰ Involvement in the justice system increases some risk factors used to predict recidivism.¹¹ Studies spanning 35 years, 29 experiments, and 7,304 youth showed that formally processing youth appeared to have no crime control effect and, across all measures utilized, it appeared to increased delinquency.¹²

Illustration 1: Identity Confusion



References for Illustration 1: Identity Confusion are available as Endnotes 13(A) - 13(E).

Making Justice System Involvement a Growth Experience

While involvement in the delinquency system is associated with higher recidivism and supports the need for more robust alternative responses, system involvement cannot and should not always be avoided. To best serve those youth and community safety, it is incumbent upon the system to utilize the principles of adolescent development not only to reduce iatrogenic effects, but to make justice system involvement a growth experience. Four types of experiences have been empirically shown to foster increases in psychosocial maturity or growth and well-being.¹⁴ These experiences are shown below (see *Table 1*) in relation to the four growth experiences supported by Growth-Focused Case Management (GFCM).

Table 1: GFCM Experiences

Experiences That Increase Psychosocial Maturity	Related Youth Experiences Facilitated in GFCM
Deeper experience of self and one's actions	Positive perception of self
Heightened knowledge of self	Positive sense of one's future based on one's strengths
Strengthening personally meaningful abilities	Positive planning and action regarding one's future
Exploration and learning	Positive quest to become one's best or ideal self

Milwaukee County's Response

DYFS boldly set out in 2012 to change the way it worked with youth in order to advance the youth's developmental growth, not just monitor and enforce their conditions of probation. Among other measures taken, a Probation System Review was conducted by the Robert F. Kennedy National Resource Center for Juvenile Justice (RFK National Resource Center), a program of Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps. This review included an analysis of DYFS's case-planning process, which resulted in recommending foundational training on the science of adolescent brain development and positive youth development, and encouraged DYFS to turn these principles into practice by improving their case-management system.

BACKGROUND

Improvement Efforts in Milwaukee County

Implementing GFCM requires viewing youth and their offending through a developmental lens. As such, agencies most likely to be ready to utilize GFCM are already engaged in efforts to improve practice and youth outcomes, or at least possess a strong desire to do so. While administrative leadership is essential in this regard, there needs to be buy-in from frontline staff. As highlighted below, GFCM is part of DYFS's broader improvement initiative. A preexisting commitment to transformation and the tenets of positive youth development provided the foundation for successfully implementing GFCM.

Improvement efforts that preceded Milwaukee's adoption of GFCM were as follows:

- Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) and risk assessment for all youth on community supervision.
- Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiatives and use of a detention risk assessment instrument.
- Juvenile Justice Reform and Reinvestment Initiative (JJRRI), which assessed the structure of programming and service delivery within the juvenile justice system.
- Probation System Review conducted by the RFK National Resource Center (discussed below).

Pertinent Findings of the RFK National Resource Center's Probation System Review

The 10-month Probation System Review (PSR) was conducted in 2017. The review process covered four areas, which together contributed to fostering an organizational climate that reflected an increased level of readiness for GFCM. Specifically:

- **Administration:** An expansive review of policies, including DYFS's case-planning policy, helped set expectations for more effective case management practice.
- **Probation Supervision:** Findings in this element laid the groundwork for development of a GFCM supervision framework, focused on positive youth development.
- **Inter- and Intra-agency Work Processes:** Cross-agency leadership and affected stakeholders, (e.g., district attorney, public defender, judges, and DYFS Human Service Workers (formerly referred to as "probation officers"), were encouraged to collaboratively embrace a greater understanding of adolescent brain development science, the impact of trauma, and risk- and strengths-based case planning to achieve goals of risk-reduction, protection of community, and successful youth outcomes.
- **Quality Assurance:** This element resulted in a GFCM monitoring and evaluation system that reflected and supported the desired youth outcomes associated with positive identity formation and desistance from offending.

The 18 findings and recommendations for improvement from the final PSR report specified action steps in all four areas of the review. One finding highlighted the negative interactions between youth and justice system officials that reinforced a youth's identity as a deviant. Subsequently, a recommendation was made to integrate two complementary foci: (1) youth's compliance with court-ordered conditions; and (2) identification of their developmental needs, enhancement of their cognitive skills, and support for incentivized, positive behavior change. The recommendation called for a management and supervision approach that "articulates the core concepts of adolescent brain development and the need to be proficient in understanding the hallmarks of a youth justice system that translates the research to practice." DYFS endorsed the findings of the review and began an effort to focus more intentionally on effective and meaningful case-management approaches and activities. DYFS secured a consultant and, over a two-year period, developed and piloted GFCM.

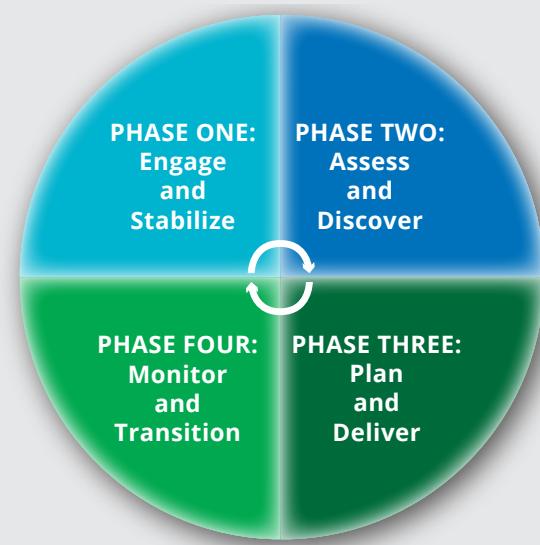
GOALS OF GFCM AND HOW IT WORKS

The goals of GFCM are as follows and work together to protect community safety and victims' rights through practices that assist youth in maturing out of offending¹⁵ (i.e., desistance):

1. interact with youth in an organized and positive manner;
2. facilitate growth experiences through involvement in case planning; and
3. foster positive identity formation and desistance.

These goals are attained through the GFCM framework illustrated (see *Illustration 2*) and explained below.

Illustration 2: Four Phases of the GFCM Framework



The GFCM framework is comprised of four phases defined by areas of interaction with a youth:

Phase One: Engage and Stabilize

- Facilitate youth's self-exploration
- Youth experiences positive perceptions of self; youth explores who they are and who they can become

Phase Two: Assess and Discover

- Facilitate youth's self-discovery
- Youth experiences putting positive attention on one's future; youth discovers strengths they can use in becoming their best/ideal self

Phase Three: Plan and Deliver

- Facilitate youth's self-efficacy
- Youth experiences positive planning and action; youth believes they can improve and takes action to do so

Phase Four: Monitor and Transition

- Facilitate youth's self-realization
- Youth experiences positive identity formation; youth realizes what they have to offer and takes on roles to do so

Table 2: GFCM Process Examples

	Youth's Developmental Tasks (supported through guided facilitation)	Youth's Involvement in Case Planning (integrated throughout each phase)	How Youth's Involvement Informs Case Plan
Phase One: Engage and Stabilize	Self-exploration	Discusses and explores a future version of best or ideal self.	Best or ideal self is used to determine long-term goal .
Phase Two: Assess and Discover	Self-discovery	Discusses and discovers strengths and ways they can be used to become best/ideal self.	Using strengths counters weaknesses (i.e., criminogenic risks), which informs short-term goals .
Phase Three: Plan and Deliver	Self-efficacy	Discusses and identifies ways to use their strengths for what needs to learned, increased, developed, or obtained in order to improve.	Specific action steps for getting to short-term goals regarding what will be learned, developed, increased, or obtained.
Phase Four: Monitor and Transition	Self-realization	Recognizes positive identity and commits to involvement in executing the case plan.	Supporting youth's follow-through on action steps and taking on new roles (i.e., changed identity).

Each phase involves a core practice that facilitates or supports a developmental task associated with identity formation. These developmental tasks involve exploring one's self and who one can become; discovering strengths; effectively taking responsible action; and, realizing what one has to offer, and doing so (e.g., one's potential).

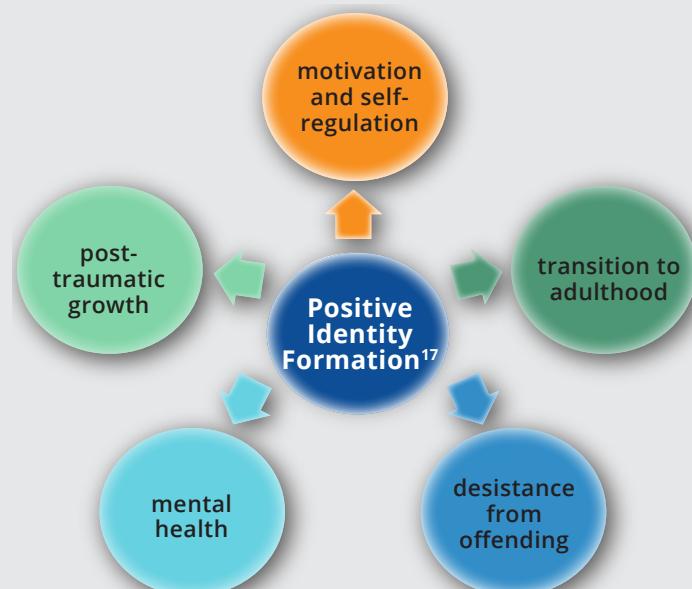
As the Human Service Worker/Probation Officer facilitates the tasks, based on the training and GFCM guidelines provided, the youth has a series of transformative experiences; examples of the GFCM process are described in *Table 2: GFCM Process Examples*. Human Service Workers/Probation Officers become empowered and skilled at involving youth in case planning which serves as the initial step in helping the youth form a positive identity. The case plan is much more than a document about compliance, rather it is the youth's path to a positive identity and transitioning into adulthood.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

1. Assisting youth in defining their ideal selves and forming a positive identity has become central to case management practice. Supervision of youth involves supporting progress toward empirically established outcomes of positive identity formation (see *Illustration 3: Positive Identity Formation*), not just compliance with court orders.
2. Initial steps toward evaluating outcomes associated with desistance are underway.

3. Integration of GFCM and its positive youth development perspective, with the RNR approach, is becoming the normative practice of Human Service Workers. As illustrated (see *Table 3: GFCM Promotive Factors*), GFCM adds practices to facilitate growth and activate promotive factors.¹⁶

Illustration 3: Positive Identity Formation



References for Illustration 3: Positive Identity Formation are available as Endnotes 17(A) - 17(E).

Table 3: GFCM Promotive Factors

RNR Practice Areas	Growth Facilitation	Promotive Factors
Assess risk to reoffend.	Also see risks as barriers to youth's potential. Facilitate self-exploration to connect with true self and imagine who they can become (e.g., future identity). This informs case plan's long-term goal.	Consider youth's pain related to the lived experience of risk to help lessen their suffering. Youth experiences a more positive perception of self which activates the hope essential for growing out of offending.
Identify criminogenic needs to address.	Also see needs as barriers to ideal self. Facilitate self-discovery to know weaknesses and strengths. Using strengths to overcome weaknesses informs case plan's short-term goals.	Identifying strengths is an appraisal of youth that lessens offending. Youth experiences a positive orientation toward the future that activates the determination essential for growing out of offending.
Match services with characteristics of the youth.	Also match services with youth's aspirations. Facilitate self-efficacy for taking healthy risks to change and move toward ideal self. Action needed to do so informs case plan's action steps.	Youth's participation in case planning is procedural justice, which reduces offending. Youth experiences positive planning that activates the sense of purpose essential for growing out of offending.
Supervise youth based on risk level.	Also see supervision as a collaboration in support of the youth's identity formation. Facilitate self-realization by bolstering youth's new commitment(s) as contained in ideal self.	Supporting identity formation is a positive approach to monitoring behavior. Youth experiences agency that activates the competence essential for growing out of offending.

OUTCOMES ACHIEVED

Although DYFS is very early in the GFCM implementation process, it is realizing preliminary promising outcomes. In comparison to the 2018 control group, data from the pilot phase show a 20% increase in the number of youth who gained protective skills. Additionally, youth in the pilot cases dramatically decreased their risk to reoffend in comparison with the control group. Both of these outcomes are consistent with findings of multiple research reports as well as reports on effective desistance practices. These reports confirm that growth or maturation related to positive identity formation reduces offending.

There was improvement in the ability of Human Service Workers to foster the four growth experiences to a degree that they could recognize them in the lives of youth:

- 68% were able to recognize when youth on their caseload were gaining a more positive perception of self.

- 70% were able to recognize when youth on their caseload were focusing their attention on a positive future.
- 65% percent were able to recognize when youth on their caseload were learning or using goal-setting skills.
- 62% were able to recognize when youth on their caseload were focusing on a purpose.

FUTURE PLANS

DYFS will continue implementing and refining GFCM, as well as integrating routine quality assurance measures and long-term sustainability in implementation planning. Materials developed for DYFS are being generalized for utilization by other jurisdictions around the country, and training and technical assistance is being designed for the same. In partnership with the RFK National Resource Center, GFCM will be offered to jurisdictions in conjunction with the Probation System Review process. Other avenues will be explored by the RFK National Resource Center to provide jurisdictions access to GFCM training and technical assistance.

About the Author

Jonathan I. Cloud has thirty-eight years of human services experience encompassing the fields of mental health, family preservation, child protection, youth services, foster care reform, and youth justice. He has provided training and technical assistance to numerous jurisdictions across the country on behalf of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and the National Criminal Justice Training Center.

ENDNOTES

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