

## **VULNERABLE GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN**

### ***What Works for Girls and Young Women***

There has historically been a tendency to group girls and young women's offending and risk taking behaviours alongside those of boys and young men. As a consequence, responses to offending and risk taking behaviours tend to be derived from the principles of "What Works?" which stem from theories of male offending and often do not fully meet the needs of females.

Although there are some similarities in risk factors associated with offending behaviour across both genders, some are more strongly associated with girls.

- Violence is a common theme across both genders. Girls and young women can present challenging behaviour which is unpredictable and violent. At times they can be skilled at manipulating others in order to try to have their needs met – themes within this are neglect and abuse, substance misuse, negative peer association, absconding, mental and emotional health, and sexually risky behaviour
- Girls and boys respond differently to external pressures – girls are more likely to internalise difficulties e.g. self harm, whereas boys are more likely to externalise in the form of more delinquent and anti-social behaviour

There is also still a marked difference in societal attitudes towards girls in that they are perceived to be more in need of moral protection, and are often assessed as high risk as a result of high levels of need. A disproportionate number of girls continue to be placed in secure care due to the impact of sexually risky behaviours, victimisation and a range of mental and emotional disorders.

### **Making Our Services Work**

In Scotland, there is currently limited provision of services which provide suitable alternatives to secure care, particularly in the community, which protect vulnerable girls and young women, and manage high risk whilst addressing complex needs. There are, however, overarching principles which should underpin all work with girls who are involved in offending and risk taking behaviours which can be applied in day to day practice.

- Ensure girls are not disadvantaged in avoidable ways relative to boys
- Take account of the circumstances contributing to girls' behaviour and the associated risks of recidivism
- Interventions should be based on a therapeutic model which is evidence based
- Interventions need to be trauma informed and have the ability to deal with a range of problems whilst being mindful of the impact of the trauma
- Play to girls' strengths – a solution focused rather than a problem focused approach
- Recognise the importance of relationships in girls' lives and use these to construct alternative attitudes and lifestyles
- Promote the constructive use of networks of support – family, social and professional – however keep the number of professionals involved to a minimum
- Provide a physically and emotionally safe environment which is female friendly and allows time and space for girls to be with other females – including access to female staff
- Encourage girls to become more self reliant and independent
- Acknowledge that girls need support systems which are sustainable in the long term to achieve and maintain positive lifestyles.

***Linda Robb***