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Right now, as many as seven out of every 10 young people that leave the juvenile justice system fail. They either get rearrested, sent back to their facilities that a juvenile agency runs or they get sent to an adult prison or jail, and they don't do well there. At best, they just miss out on services like education. At worst, they become victims. So, I'm going to tell you everything I've learned in 25 years, about how I think if we do things in juvenile reentry just a little bit differently, we can really turn around these young lives and that's what we need to do. I'm going to start by telling you a story about Jamal.

**Slide 1 – “When people tell me I’m bad, it don’t make it easy to be good.” (0:41)**

He was a young man that I met when he was just about to turn 18. And he was about to be released from the department of youth services. And at the time, I was doing my graduate work at Northeastern University, but Jamal and I were talking about what was going to be different this time around when he leaves, what had changed, what was going to make it so he was not going to come back. He'd been in and out of the system for at least six or seven years. This last charge was one of those wonderfully phrased juvenile justice terms. It was weapons related, which meant he's just a bad shot, luckily. But what he said to me was, "When people tell me I'm bad, it don't make it easy to be good. When people tell me I'm bad, it don't make it easy to be good." And what he is saying has stayed with me throughout the whole thing, and the evidence is mounted up, that as important it is as the services and the assessments and the planning that we do for kids, it's really making sure that we understand what they're thinking, what they're believing, what their hopes, what their dreams are.

**Slide 2 – Step 1: Find out what youths are feeling, thinking, and believing. This bar graph looks at some of the things that the youth felt helped them. The highest rated at 70% was “Helped me improve my attitude”. (1:44)**

So, I do have a little data to support what Jamal said. This is from the PBS Project, which does work with secure and community residential facilities. And we collect a lot of data. I think we do surveys of youth, as many as 10,000 a year. And that's just part of, and the idea is this is data to be used immediately for systems improvement. But we asked kids, "What was the most helpful thing that was done for you to get you ready for reentry?" And most of them said, "They changed my attitude. They helped me go from negative to positive, hopeless to hopeful. I can't do it. I can. I'm never going to change. No one's going to believe me. To, yes, in fact, I can make it happen."

So the first thing I think we need to do a little differently is make sure we're finding out what the kids are thinking, believing, and their hopes. You know what? And that's not rocket science. Just ask them. They'd love to tell you.

**Slide 3 – Step 2: Treat juvenile justice youths like kids; ideally like one of your own. (2:40)**

The next thing is, I think we really have to get in our hearts that we treat these kids just like kids. And the best really is those people out there who treat them like one of their own. My mentor was a perfect example of how leadership can really do it. His name was Ned Locker and, and he was a Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Services. And he would take the kids under wings and one in particular, basically was raised by the system. He came into DYS custody when he was 15 and it was a horrific case. He killed his grandmother, his mother, and then his grandfather over an 18 hour period. It became a political football because the district attorney blew the case. It was not waived to adult court, but he ended up in DYS until he was about 23. It became such a political football. Ned had to

move him out of state a few times, which he did, but the press found out where he was and they really wouldn't let them go until 23, which is a really old time to take him.

So Ned was with them the whole time and they stayed in touch. And then when Joe finally, a few years later, was about to get married, who did he call? He called Ned. But it takes leadership at the top to really treat these kids. And in that agency, you could see how it was a commissioner. It got all the way down to all the facilities and all the staff. And it's really living into that vision.

**Slide 4 – Let Them Play! “What leapt out of the information we were accumulating was that both Whitman and the homicidal males had NOT engaged in normal rough and tumble play. No memories of playground buddies. No involvement in games of chase and escape. Lots of aggression or isolation.” Dr. Stuart Brown, author of Play; founder National Institute for Play. (4:06)**

The other thing is you have to let them play. A young man said to me, when I was visiting once, I said, "Well, what do you do? What are you doing here in the facility, especially in your free time?" He said, "Oh, we play ping pong. We play cards. We play board games. I never got to play that before. I've never done that before." Let them play. And it is born out in research. Stuart Brown was a violence researcher in Texas when the UT massacre happened. And he was one of a group of people called upon by the governor to figure out what happened. What made this Charles Whitman becomes so incredibly violent. And no one thought that this group of experts would ever agree on anything. But what they agreed on was Whitman never had a chance to play. He wasn't even allowed to explore crawling around. At four, he was to play the piano. And if he didn't do it for hours on end, he was punished. So we really need to play. And Stuart Brown went on, instead of being a violence researcher, now he's a play researcher and he studied people on death row and found the same thing. And play is so easy. It's an easy thing for any program or facility to do. And it's fun for staff too. These are two young women who for the first time finished a 5k and all you need to do is take a look at their faces.

**Slide 5 – Image of two youth in art class. (5:22)**

And also make sure that you tap into kids' creativity. Find their talents. What lights them up? They will do anything if they really like it and they really love it. And we love this and seen so much success with this, that our organization, a few years ago, started a talent contest. We work in about 35 States. So it's called the National Talent Contest and we get many, many over 100 videos. Then we let the performer come and perform live at our National Awards Ceremony. We get singing, dancing, card tricks, basketball. Kids just ... Who doesn't want five minutes of fame? And you can think of what it does to lift their spirits, their hopes, their dreams. They just feel like they're valued, that they belong, they've got a place.

**Slide 6 – Step 3: Support their educational aspirations and career goals. (6:10)**

So. All right. Moving on to step three. We need to bend over backwards to make sure that we can help them with their education and employment. It not only is born out, what we do in services and research, but they need be able to live independently. A lot of what we've learned is to think of it ... In juvenile justice, usually it's two separate things. There's education and then there's employment and try to create more of a career pathway.

Kids have got to plan out kind of where they want to go. And then what do they need to get there? Not everybody is going to need or want a college degree, but they need to think long-term and a job has got to be something that can turn into a career.

One of the best programs we visited for this reentry work was a program where the Executive Director spent a significant amount of time in the community finding out what jobs there were. So for example, at one point there are a lot of nursing jobs. So that's the kind of training he started having in his program. Then it switched to tech and he moved to tech. At the same time, in a very rural state, they had an awesome welding program. There wasn't welding for about 100 miles. So it's really both the kid's point of view and also making sure that the jobs are real, the jobs are sustainable. And how about the jobs pay? Right? These two young men work in one of the facilities where we are, and we do an employment matching. We match up to a \$1,000, what they earn over the summer. Just to encourage them and to encourage the programs to do this. These kids were getting paid \$3 an hour. It's the little things.

**Slide 7 – *Ready and Prepared: Bar graph looking at how youth feel they are prepared for things like getting a job, their confidence, support, transportation, and being able to support themselves.* (7:47)**

Oh, and just another quick look at when we're talking about how they are ready for their jobs. It's this idea that if you look at this, that the blue bars are strongly disagree. It's easy to think you're ready to go get a job, but you also have to remember all the way down to the things like, "I need to be able to pay my rent and living expenses". So employment and education is sort of a whole big thing. But if we put it together, we can really make a difference.

**Slide 8 – *"I'm here for almost nine years, that's more than half as long as I've been alive...My life is over"* Stephen K. (8:15)**

And here, this is a good story about how education in this one particular case, it can help turn a kid's life around. He went in, this is Steven, he went in just totally devastated. He, like most of these kids, they come from great disadvantages. There are poverty, violence. They have not gotten all the feeling of connection that you need when you're a young kid. So anyway, at 15 he ran away and he got in really big trouble and he got sentenced to nine years. And as he says, he felt his life was almost over.

**Slide 9 – *"To be honest, with what happened in my life as a kid, being incarcerated probably saved my life."* Stephen K. (8:50)**

But thanks really to people who pushed him to get his high school diploma. He was homeschooled for about five or six years. And he never went to high school. He never went to school. In the facility, he got his high school diploma and he said, "Oh my gosh, a light went off." And then he got his college degree. He did an online course and he graduated *cum laude*. And then they said, "Well, why don't you go get a master's degree?" And he said, "Well, all right." And he's now a global supply chain management degree. He works full time. And he is actually an officer on a foundation that we just started to raise money, to give out more money for kids for scholarships. He got a couple of our scholarships while he was still locked up. And he called our office and said, "Thanks." And that was the inspiration. All we needed to know. You have to do more of this and just these little bits help the kids.

**Slide 10 – *Step 4: Build trusting relationships.* (9:46)**

And then the last is help them build some trusting relationships. The search institute, who did the developmental assets some of you may have heard of, now they're really promoting developmental relationships and it's wonderful work. And the theory is basically that the relationship is like fluoride in toothpaste. It's the key ingredient that makes everything else work. Right?

And we have a young woman who works for us, who's been through the system, and I asked her, "What was it for you that was going to be different this time when you left?" And she said, "I could trust my caseworker." I said, "Well, how did that happen?" She said, "Well," first she said, "Well, when I was late or didn't go to school, they would call me instead of my mom." But she said, "Really, over time, she listened and she heard. She didn't sit there and nod, but she really, really heard. And she didn't always just tell me what to do. We had a dialogue around that."

**Slide 11 – Reentry Standards Framework: Principles, Practices, Short-term Outcomes, Long-term Outcomes. (10:43)**

So, there are also a couple of little things. There are a lot of wonderful checklists out there for kids. Without your meds, there are a lot of problems that could possibly happen. This is what kids told us in October that they had in their backpacks. We like to use a backpack metaphor. What do we really need to have kids take with them when they leave facilities? And I do think cell phones are important, but I think your medical records can go a long way in certain situations, as well as a valid ID.

So all the information that we collect, we share with everybody we work with, because the point is you want to change this. And we look at data twice a year so you can see progress. And also, you can catch when things are going in the wrong direction.

This real quickly are the basic frameworks that we've found in over a year's worth of research. And then about a year and a half out in the field, finding out what was actually happening. And you can see there's principles that we think should be agency-wide, practices that go on at the facility and agency level. Short-term outcomes, because recidivism is great, but it's much more important, in my opinion, I think to find out things more immediately, when you can do something and really impact change.

**Slide 12 – Image of a youth that participated in the awards ceremony with several quotes from youth.**

- ***“The financial assistance will help me continue my education in clinical mental health counseling. I will also be able to seek out additional training opportunities in my particular interests, which include working with adolescents and using experiential methods by partnering with wilderness and/or horses.”***
- ***“When I was late for school, my case worker called me, not my parents...she listened to me. I could trust her.”***
- ***“I am very passionate about being a mechanic because it reminds me of the long nights I spent in the garage with my father. As far as employment goes, I would want to be employed by Chevrolet to help continue to build the future cars of America...I’m in it because this has been my goal ever since I learned to walk. I didn’t give up then and I won’t give up now.” (11:55)***

And with that, this is a picture of a young man who performed this year at our National Awards Ceremony, and just knocked it out of the park with his singing and his personality. But really all it is, is letting him be a kid. Thanks.