



TAKE THE LEAD

Young people in search of direction
Dogs in search of homes

The story of a collaborative project
between the RSPCA and the Surrey Youth Justice Service.
Initiated by Jo McHale, MPhil; CPsychol



This is the story of four young people at a critical point in their lives who signed up to help some of the RSPCA's dogs in desperate need of new homes.





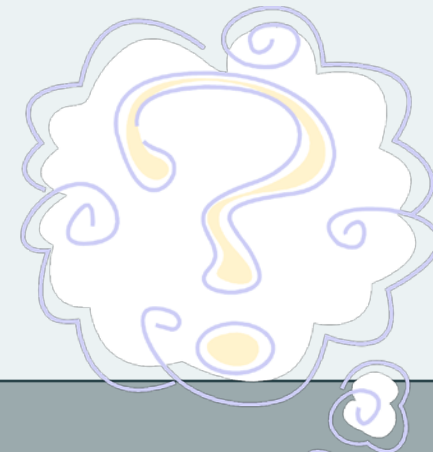
It all began in HMP YOI Reading...

YOI = Young Offenders Institution, catering for male offenders aged 18-21.

... with groups of young men whose impulses had led to drink and drug taking, violent behaviour, arrest and a prison sentence. Once inside, some of them signed up for a one-off programme that I and my colleague ran, based on Nonviolent Communication under the banner of Anger Management.

Despite the cramped surroundings, fluctuating group membership and the constraints of a prison regime, some of our participants made significant breakthroughs. At the same time, they were all limited by their habitual reactions and the way they interpreted their world. For example, their assessments of an incident or state of mind were confined to 'it's cushdie' (meaning 'it's OK' or 'good'), 'I'm pissed off/angry' or 'It's doing my head in' if something was taking them out of their comfort zone.

We were convinced that they had the potential to go further. But helping them develop their 'emotional intelligence' meant asking them to talk about their experiences and to explore the possibility of making different choices. This raised a significant question.....



What experiences would they talk about?

We did not believe it appropriate to ask the participants to talk in the group about their offences. And rarely were they willing to discuss their experiences of prison life. So we concentrated on our moment by moment interactions with them, particularly when they were feeling stressed and angry about prison matters. Some participants eventually agreed to role-play incidents with family members.

In every case, we came up against the young men's belief that they were powerless and had no choices. They saw themselves as reacting to things over which they had no control. To keep themselves safe, they avoided saying or doing anything that might be perceived as weakness. This limited their willingness to explore alternative ways of behaving.



Limitations of classroom learning

The young men we met at HMP YOI Reading had experienced few, if any, stable relationships with people they could trust. Nor had they developed the self-awareness, self-control and ability to put themselves in other people's shoes that might keep them out of trouble.

Could they learn these things in a classroom? Our experience was that they found it difficult. Whilst we could demonstrate patience and empathy in our dealings with them, we were just a small part of a bigger system in which relationship building was not a priority. We did have an influence but it was small and outweighed by the prevailing culture.

I longed to offer real live experiences that would be a crucible in which patience, empathy, responsibility – and much more besides – could grow. What might that be?



‘gone to the dogs’

My thoughts turned to dogs.

Why? Because they are dependent on people for their well-being. Looking after them requires awareness of their physical and social needs and willingness to take responsibility for meeting those needs. Training them means accepting them as they are – without attributing malice or judging them as stupid, lazy or uncooperative – and becoming the most attractive presence in their lives. It involves communicating clearly and making specific requests of them – and continuing to be patient when they do something different.

In return, they hold no grudges. Instead, they offer unconditional love. Working with them provides opportunities to develop empathy, to nurture, to care and to give and receive. In other words, dog training is about building relationships.



Other people thought the same!

I wasn't alone in seeing the potential benefits of offenders, young and old, working with dogs. Prisons in the US, Canada, Australia and Italy (and maybe elsewhere) run programmes where inmates prepare rescue dogs for re-homing or train young puppies to become assistance dogs or to detect explosives or drugs. The effect on the men and women training them can be far reaching.

Pathways to Hope *"(Working with dogs) teaches inmates to become 'other' centred. It gives them hope in their lives and shows them that they can be loved."* Sister Pauline Quinn

Puppies Behind Bars Inmates say: *"I've learned to give."* *"The dog has helped me become compassionate."* *"A lot of personal growth has come along with this. When I go home, I believe I can succeed in something."*

PAWS in Prison *"We've seen a significant difference in discipline issues since we introduced the dogs here."* Prison Officer

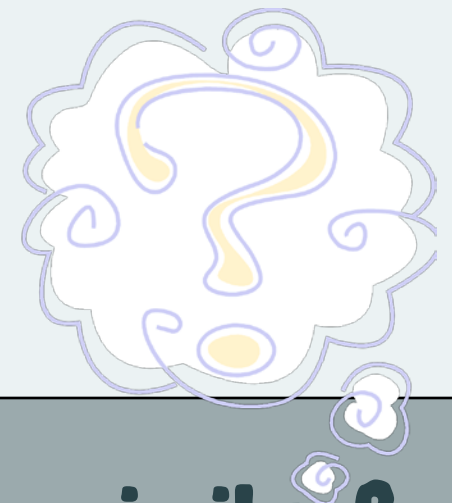


The one I'm familiar with is Project Pooch

Mission statement "Project POOCH, Inc.® provides opportunities for young men in corrections to develop the personal and vocational skills they will need to become responsible, productive members of the community. The program accomplishes this by teaching the youths to care for and train shelter dogs for adoption."

The young men say: "You learn so much responsibility here." "It's given me a whole different outlook on life." "It's helped me form a bond with the dog. It's just pure friendship. Pure love."

This programme is run at the Maclaren Correctional Facility in Woodburn, Oregon, US. In 2007, I visited the young men and their dogs. I was touched by the strength of the bonds they had formed with their dogs. An evaluative piece of research followed up over 100 former participants in Project Pooch and found a marked improvement in their behaviour and zero recidivism after release.



Where could I start with something similar?

My challenges were to find:

- a source of dogs in need of training
- young people who could benefit from learning relationship skills through dog training
- a dog trainer willing to take on the young people as well as the dogs
- a venue in which the training could be given
- an 'umbrella' organisation willing to co-ordinate and fund the project.

A local youth intervention police officer was enthusiastic – and introduced me to a far-sighted school teacher who was supportive of the idea. This gave me access to young people – but not to dogs. And I wanted the training to be done on the dogs' home territory, to minimise the stress they might experience.



Finding the perfect match

The RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) and the Surrey Youth Justice Service (SYJS) proved to be an ideal partnership.

The SYJS saw the project as a potentially powerful element in the 25 hours per week of meaningful activity that young offenders are required to do when they have been assigned to an Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme (ISSP).

Sue Walters, who manages the RSPCA's Millbrook Animal Centre, Chobham, Surrey, was very willing to provide a training room and a selection of dogs, in the expectation that the training they would receive would make them easier to re-home. Her only proviso was that the training would be done by the Centre's own animal behaviourist and dog trainer, June Williams, who had the added advantage of being a qualified and experienced teacher. This was easy to agree to because it put in place the final piece of the jigsaw!



Setting up the project

The format of the project was for four young people to attend a ½ day induction, followed by five consecutive ½ day sessions, starting a week later. The young people were volunteers from the group on the ISSP and were vetted by the SYJS.

June adapted the syllabus from that of the Kennel Club's Bronze award, which she would normally teach to dog owners over a period of eight weeks, in weekly hour-long sessions. She enlisted the help of Kate MacNeill, a Millbrook Kennel Assistant. Kate had worked with June for many years in dog training classes and on dogs' behavioural issues and agreed to co-train the group. My role was to be that of a learning guide, helping the participants to reflect on their experiences and make links with other aspects of their lives.

The dogs were chosen on the basis of their need and their anticipated ability to be able to cope with training in a group.



Preliminary work

At the very least, we wanted participants to be able to tolerate dogs. If they had had any experiences that might affect their ability to work with dogs in general, or a breed or type of dog in particular, we needed to know. So those that volunteered to take part in the project were asked to complete a questionnaire. This gave us some information about each individual's experiences with, and attitudes towards, dogs. The twelve questions included:

What was the best/worst thing you have experienced with a dog?

Have you seen a dog fight another dog? Have you heard a dog growl?

Have you ever been bitten by a dog? Have you visited a rescue centre? If so, what did you think/feel?

What is the best way to get a dog to do something?

It was reassuring to read one young person's answer to that last item: 'Give it lots of love'.

On the basis of the information given and the SYJS's knowledge and experience of its young clients, four young men were given the go-ahead to take part in the project, accompanied by two supervisors.



The induction session

The purpose of this first three-hour meeting was to give the young people a 'hands-on' experience of working with dogs and to stress the importance of their role in increasing the dogs' chances of being re-homed. For us, it was also an opportunity to see what challenges we might be facing and to check that the group could work appropriately with the dogs.

We introduced the group to:

- what we would be asking them to do and the Code of Conduct we would like them to keep to
- Health and Safety rules
- dog and handler behaviour
- kind, reward-based training methods as endorsed by the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT)
- practical work in the kennels.

To bring the session to life and to engage their attention, we introduced them to our own dogs as well as some of the Centre's. We also took them on a tour of the cattery and other facilities.



The Code of Conduct

The project was taking place at times when the centre was open to the public and we wanted to protect the reputation of the RSPCA. We also wanted to create an atmosphere in which the dogs felt relaxed and in which we could establish a productive working relationship. We therefore asked the four young men to sign an agreement saying they would:

- Handle all dogs gently
- Feed the dogs only with the treats provided
- Be respectful
- Follow instructions
- Be with a member of staff at all times
- Always ask if unsure
- Smoke only at break time and in designated areas
- Clear up after their dog
- Wear appropriate clothing for reasons of health and safety (and to avoid alarming the dogs)

They balked at the expectation that they would clear up after their dog, but their willingness to comply with this never had to be put to the test!

In future, we will also ask them to give their mobile phone to a member of staff at the beginning of a sessions, for safe keeping.



Content of the five three-hour sessions

Each session was divided into two halves, separated by a 15 minute break.

At the start of the session, each group member would be escorted to the kennels to collect their allocated dog, put on its harness and walk it on the lead back to the training room. Before the break and again at the end of the session, they would return their dogs to the kennels.

Over the course of the five sessions, the dogs learned to sit, stay, leave food untouched, walk on a loose lead, avoid jumping up at people, lie down, present a paw, permit examination and grooming, pay attention to a target and perform a 'waiting room sit'.

We also invited an RSPCA inspector to talk about his job and to show the equipment he keeps in his van, prepared for any incident to which he might be called.



How things went

During the induction session we carefully observed the behaviour of group members towards each other, towards the dogs and towards us. The way these interactions played out suggested that we were witnessing at least one young person with a very fragile sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy and that the group dynamics would need careful handling.

Throughout the following week, attendance varied with one participant unable to attend at all. Of the remaining participants, one attended two sessions, one attended three and one made it to four sessions before having to attend court. So our sessions never had more than two participants, and 'group dynamics' didn't become an issue.

We were delighted by the way in which the four young people accepted instructions and bonded with their dogs. The training they delivered proceeded surprisingly quickly, leaving time to teach the dogs some fun tricks.



What did we learn?

1. Different organisations can work together for mutual benefit.
2. It was possible to run the project alongside the normal work of the Centre.
3. We need to have sufficient staff resources to enable us to give one-to-one attention if necessary.
4. The young people showed that they could form affectionate and respectful partnerships with their dog.
5. The dogs learned useful behaviours that enhanced their appeal to potential owners.
6. Participants and their supervisors spoke positively about the experience.





Reflections from June and Kate

June and Kate:

“When we run our usual training sessions for dogs re-homed from the RSPCA, we cover the Kennel Club syllabus for the Bronze Award over eight weeks and the owners have plenty of opportunity to reinforce the learning in between classes. So before the project started, we began to have doubts about how much the dogs would learn in a week, without that reinforcement.

And then at the induction session, we wondered what we had taken on!

But when the actual training sessions started, we were pleasantly surprised on both counts. The young men showed commendable patience and concentration and we got through the syllabus with time to spare to teach the dogs some fun tricks.

As things turned out, we enjoyed the experience and are planning to repeat it.”



My reflections – Jo McHale

I was so pleased to have all the pieces in the jigsaw fit together. The collaboration between the RSPCA and the SYJS proved to be an effective and mutually satisfying partnership. It was a delight to see the young men getting to know their dogs and working in harmony with them.

However, there was one element that didn't work as I had hoped. We wanted the young people to learn about themselves as well as about training dogs. To do this, we planned to include 10 minutes or so of 'circle time' two or three times in each session. But we quickly found that this led to long silences and looks of puzzlement. Maybe our participants didn't understand what they were being asked to do or why. Maybe the experience of sitting in a circle was so unfamiliar that it became stressful. Maybe they needed to know us better before being willing to reveal anything about themselves.

The next time the project is run, we will be experimenting with different ways of encouraging participants to reflect and learn about themselves at the same time as working with the dogs.



My dream for the future of this project

I am convinced that the concept of working with dogs has immense potential in helping people to build relationships based on trust and mutual respect. I have been encouraged by the outcomes of the project and am happy to hear that both the RSPCA and the SYJS are willing to run it again. In the future, I would also like to:

- share the experience with others who see the potential of the project for their client group
- offer a similar project it to a different 'client' base: for example, those in recovery from substance abuse or preparing for release from prison
- offer a longer version of the project, including a wider range of activities with the dogs
- deepen the relationship-building aspects of the project, helping participants to articulate and reflect on their experiences and make links with other aspects of their lives.

If you share my dream and would like to talk about ways of making it a reality, please email me on jomchale@talking-truly.com or ring me on 01252 792322



Celebrations!

On the last day, I asked the sole attendee what he had most enjoyed about the week. My spirits lifted when I heard him say 'It's the connection with the dogs'. So he had had the experience of building a positive relationship!

Some weeks after the project finished, I heard that his time at Millbrook Animal Centre was deemed to have been a turning point. Subsequent reports on his progress have been very positive.



Could you be involved in taking this further?

I work with people whose habitual ways of thinking and behaving lead them into conflictual – and sometimes anti-social – relationships – with their partner, their family, their peers or with people they meet on a day-by-day basis. I help them:

- see their worlds more clearly – without the distortions that come from attributions of blame, a desire for revenge or a sense of hurt
- become aware of their feelings and how these relate to their underlying needs
- listen to the stories they have running in their heads, and to translate these into feelings and needs
- find strategies for meeting their needs that are considerate of others and don't involve mental or physical violence.

If people have the verbal skills, I help them to work through their problems in talk-based sessions. When this is not appropriate, I seek alternatives that can become a proxy for building relationships with people. Hence my initiation of 'Take the Lead'.

For more information and resources describing my work with individuals, couples and groups, go to www.talking-truly.com.

If you would like to talk in more depth about how 'Take the Lead' can be extended, please email me on jomchale@talking-truly.com or phone me on 01252 792322. If you have links with prisons, I would be particularly glad to hear from you.