

Troubled kids can be turned around

REBECCA
CLARKSON



Behind a child's "bad behaviour" there is always a bigger story. Whether it be an unmet need, lack of sleep, a need for adult attention, undiagnosed learning difficulties — or something more sinister like violence at home or sexual abuse — "bad behaviour" does not exist in a vacuum.

Projects such as the newly announced Government-funded Thoughtful Schools Project pilot, which will use trauma-informed practice to guide schools in early intervention strategies to prevent bad behaviour, is a welcome move to help more of WA's most vulnerable kids.

Too often, bad behaviour is firstly addressed through punitive measures rather than identifying the root cause. For school-age children, this may involve suspension and even expulsion. However, as per the overwhelming evidence, for the majority of kids, this kind of response just doesn't work.

But what does work, and volumes of evidence show this, is keeping kids in school so they get sufficiently educated and have a chance at a successful future. Since 2017 Save the Children's Youth Partnership Project in WA has been trying a new approach to prevent primary school children from ending up in the justice system. In partnership with the Department of Education, WA Police and Child Protection, the project worked intensively with 16 young boys who, between them, would incur nearly 150 days of suspension in just one year.

What we found was that with the right individual support that took into account the community, home and school environment, behaviour improved, disciplinary action went down, attendance increased and actual educational outcomes (including literacy and numeracy) greatly improved.

The Youth Partnership Project has already seen some of these kids successfully reintegrated into mainstream education.

Suspension or expulsion deliver none of these benefits, rather they risk further alienating kids from education — which happens to be one of the best tools to tackle youth offending.

But schools shouldn't have to do this alone — they have a big enough job as it is. Suspension may well have its place as one among a suite of tools — but as an absolute last resort. As things stand, schools are forced to turn to it too often because they're not sufficiently resourced to intervene with more targeted approaches.

Trauma informed and restorative approaches help children choose a smarter consequence, one which repairs the damage caused by bad behaviour, while also keeping children connected to school.

Targeted and intensive support is the best way to ensure these children can overcome their challenges, so when they come to school they are in the right headspace to learn and positively engage with education.

If we're to reduce youth crime and lower school suspensions, it's essential we rethink our approach and make a long-term sustainable investment in the services and supports that these children need.

That's where initiatives like the Youth Partnership Project — and the Thoughtful School Project — can be critical. While some of the Youth Partnership Project participants continue to need support, the cost of doing this pales in significance compared with the “down the line” costs of police and court time, detention or the social and economic cost of these kids not growing into successful and resilient adults.

Research commissioned by Social Reinvestment WA, a coalition of not-for profit organisations, of which Save the Children is a member, calculated the daily cost of locking up a child at \$991.

This is a bigger issue than just “bad behaviour”. We owe it to our future generation to do whatever it takes to change the story for them and their family. Supporting our most vulnerable young people is a shared problem and one which demands a shared solution.

Rebecca Clarkson is Save the Children WA manager for place-based strategies