

Juvenile Justice Vision 20/20 October 2016 Training Event
Seeking to Understand “Our” Girls: Application of the Brain Science in Juvenile Justice
and Other Relevant Female-Specific Matters for Increased Effectiveness
October 28, 2016
Presenter: Sandi Metcalf

The court is designed to program for the majority of youth who come through its doors – boys. Historically, the juvenile justice system has implemented a one size fits all approach; however, one size only fits one, and often, female specific programming is forgotten or left behind because it is such a challenge to know what to do with “our” girls.

Research clearly shows the majority of delinquent girls are primarily status offenders – running away from home, truant from school and incorrigible. They also tend to use more drugs than boys and manifest more mental health disorders than their male counterparts. Compounding this profile even further are the ever increasing dynamics of girls’ behaviors being criminalized in an effort to obtain mental health services and the total disengagement of the family because of extensive histories of trauma. Thus, girls are entering the courts at increasing numbers, and the courts report running “mental health clinics” rather than courts.

Understanding the individual needs of girls – and boys – through the advent of brain science and other approaches can assist in efforts to successfully treat all youth within the system. Further understanding the manifested behaviors can provide staff and stakeholders with more confident treatment approaches and case planning. The results can be an amazing transformation, but it takes a lot of work, commitment, patience and belief in the potential of personal and family change.

Ms. Metcalf’s presentation provided information on the gender differences between males and females based on brain science and offered ideas for application in the field of juvenile justice. These ideas challenge traditional stereotypes and myths about some common behaviors. Working with youth in the juvenile justice system is complicated, and the lack of resources to address the specific needs of girls makes the job even more difficult. It is imperative the resources are present in the juvenile justice community to address the needs of girls for their sake, their future children’s sake, and hope of the community at large.

Researchers have learned significant facts about the human brain and its development. For example:

- The brain has a powerful ability to change, adapt, and rewire itself throughout life.
- The brain changes how it uses its genetic code in response to life experiences.
- Stimulation, nutrition, exercise, stress, trauma, and injury all impact the growth rate of neurons.
- Adolescence is a period of life when there is remarkable brain growth and change.
- Different parts of the brain mature at varying rates during adolescence. The pre-frontal cortex, which includes areas that mediate “executive functioning”, mature later than areas responsible for basic functions.

- Teenagers can look like adults when in reality they are still children in terms of brain developing and function, leading to tension between adults and teens.

Girls think and act differently from boys because their brains are developmentally, functionally, structurally, and hormonally different. In the female brain, there are stronger connecting pathways between parts of the brain, resulting in greater language and fine motor skills, and more intuitive sense. Fewer parts of the brain are used in tasking. The female brain is more relational than the male brain. This makes the needs of an adolescent girl—and the issues and treatment strategies—different from those of males:

- Hormones have a greater impact physically and emotionally for girls.
- Females need a sense of belonging; rejection and isolation are devastating.
- Female brains bond through relational imperative while male brains are more visual and bond through performance.
- Girls manifest more mental health disorders, including mood and personality disorders and emotional impairments.
- Alcohol and drugs have a more profound negative impact on females than males due to several brain factors.

It is recommended that clinicians be eclectic and holistic in treatment approaches for girls. The historic “one-size-fits-all” treatment approaches are not effective with girls. Girls require individualized treatment approaches and plans. Girls need supportive, caring, mentoring adults in their lives on a sustained, consistent basis to learn specific skills and appropriate adult behavior. Treatment implications and approaches—too numerous to list in a training session summary—are detailed in the power point presentation, posted on the Juvenile Justice Vision 20/20 website under “Conferences and Events”: <http://www.gvsu.edu/juvenilejusticevision2020/>.