



Children in Wales
Plant yng Nghymru

UNCRC workshop with young offenders at an Attendance Order Centre

Children in Wales ran two workshops with young people who were fulfilling the requirements of an Attendance Centre Order. An Attendance Centre Order sentences a young person to attend an attendance centre.

The main purpose of attendance centres is to put a restriction on young offenders' leisure time – they are open on Saturdays for two or three hours. Their programmes concentrate on group work to give attendees basic skills – literacy and numeracy, life skills, cookery, first aid and money management, for example - as well as encouraging attendees to make better use of leisure time. The programme also includes victim awareness sessions, which consider the impact of offending on individuals and the community and how the young person might make amends; and sessions on drug and alcohol awareness, and sexual health matters.

The workshops explored what human rights were and how the UNCRC related to these. Children in Wales staff then focussed on certain articles of the UNCRC most relevant to their situation as young offenders. Over the two sessions 22 young people took part in the activity, only one of the young people was female.

Articles discussed in the workshop

Article 3 – All organisations concerned with children should work towards what is best for you.

When asked about article 3 there was an overwhelming response from the young people that they did not feel that organisations had acted in their best interest. Their experiences mainly focussed on their time at school and their interactions with police.

When talking about the police, in both sessions young people stated that the interaction was very negative. Many of the young people said that once the police knew them, they targeted them and deliberately escalated situations. "They see certain people and they want to target you, they get beside you and rile you." "If I hadn't been in trouble before they wouldn't stop me now, but once you've been caught they will pick on you on purpose to try and wind you up." "They wind you up because they want a reaction, they get you vexed and then they can lock you up." "They try and make you bite, and when you bite back they can arrest you for public disorder." "It's the same coppers all the time if they don't like you they keep targeting you." "They just see you and keep stopping you. They go on at me and harass me, it used to keep happening so I just don't go out much now."

Two young people were able to identify a time when they had been treated more constructively by the police when they were hanging out and drinking somewhere they shouldn't have been. The police came up and talked to them and chatted before asking them if they would move across to a place where it would not be a problem, suggesting where they could go. They saw this as acceptable and complied with the request because of the way they had been talked to.

Article 28 – You have a right to an education. Discipline in schools should respect your human dignity

Article 29 – Education should develop your personality and talents to the full. It should encourage you to respect your parents, your own and other cultures

The discussions about school focussed on secondary education and how the young people had struggled with the way they were taught, the teaching methods and content of what they were learning. The majority of the young people had dropped out of school or been excluded before reaching year 11 with some of them leaving considerably earlier. “They treat you like little kids, there should be more opportunities for training, some people don’t learn in the way schools do it”. “You don’t always have to write to get taught, you can learn by talking.” Young people were able to identify things they were good at like taking apart a bicycle and rebuilding it if it didn’t work, but felt their talents had no place in school.

The young people saw the relationship with the teacher as crucial to their engagement, “Some teachers are safe, they treat you with respect and let you work at your own pace. Others are constantly on your back and rushing you even if you don’t get the work”. The other issue that had caused problems was when they had engaged well with a teacher and been progressing well and then that teacher left and were replaced by a supply who didn’t know them or the work well. This was an experience mentioned by several of the young people and seemed to be a catalyst for disengagement and lack of qualifications. They said what was important in a teacher was that they “understand what you are going through at home”.

Article 37 – If you break the law you should not be treated cruelly. You should not be put in a prison with adults and you should be able to keep in contact with your family.

Several of the young people stated that the police had used excessive force “I was dragged down a lane; they were kicking me and kneeing me.” “They handcuffed me put me in the van and then drove fast and braked so I hit my head. They drive the van fast round corners to throw you around.” “They put the cuffs on really tight so that they cut into you”. “I woke up in my cell covered in bruises, I wanted to make a complaint but they wouldn’t let me.”

The young people all felt that there was no point in complaining about bad treatment . “You can’t say anything in court they aren’t going to listen”. I don’t think anything we say will make any difference.” “What’s the point of saying anything if it’s their word against ours no one’s going to listen.”

Article 40 – If you are accused of breaking the law you should receive legal help. Prison sentences for children should only be used for the most serious offences.

All the young people at the workshops were subject to an Attendance Order, several were prolific offenders and were wearing tags but this had kept them out of custodial sentences. They all stated that the police always offered them the services of a solicitor.