

TIPS *for* PARTNERING

with JUVENILE DETENTION CENTERS &

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

Having been involved in setting up and running outreach programs for the library for fifteen years I'm sure I've made every mistake that could be made.

By far the most personally and professionally difficult as well as fulfilling program I have implemented is the library program in the Alameda County Juvenile Hall. The tips below are a direct result of the huge number of mistakes I made in coming into the institution with all my enthusiasm and naiveté of what the library could offer.

I now have more access and success than I ever dreamed would be possible inside a locked facility. However, getting to that point took a lot of learning... hopefully I've condensed some of it here for you.

Good luck and have fun!

For more information, please feel free to contact me:

Amy Cheney
Write to Read
Alameda County Library
Juvenile Hall Literacy
2200 Fairmont Drive
San Leandro, CA 94578
510.557.0643
ajcheney@mindspring.com
<http://juvievrite2read.aclibrary.org>

WHO TO APPROACH TO SET UP THE PARTNERSHIP:

- First see if you know somebody or somebody you knows works in the facility you are interested in partnering with so you can get a sense of who the players are and what the politics are like. There may be a “Friends” of the Juvenile Hall group who knows the players and can help you.
- Depending on what your research has yielded, talk to the Director of Juvenile Hall, the principal of the school inside the Hall, or the Director of programs in the Juvenile Hall (if there is such a thing). (In my case, research brought us to the Superintendent of Schools who wanted to have a librarian in the Hall).
- Write out a clear and simple agreement about what you want to do. Your ally can help you with the languaging, etc, so that the administrators understand that you understand what you are proposing.
- It may take awhile to get into the institution and to set up the program. There are a lot of processes to go through, security clearances, etc. that can be frustrating (our fingerprinting machine has been broken for six months and fingerprints are required for anyone to come in; no matter that people have been fingerprinted elsewhere), time consuming and may seem pointless. One of the main qualities you will need to have or to develop is patience!

BASICS:

- You will need to establish credibility and respect with 1. the administrators of the facility and school, 2. all the various staff that work in the institution and, 3. the youth. All are necessary components for a successful partnership and program.
- Listen more than you talk. As Patrick Jones says, “When partnering with correctional facilities, we must understand the need to support the goals of that institution even if they may conflict with our values.” (“Reaching Out to Young Adults in Jail.” YALS. Fall, 2004: 14-17). Remember that you are a guest in this institution. You are not an equal partner with an equal voice. What may be a priority for you may not be a priority for them. Their priorities are going to take precedence. Their top priority is most likely security, and there are a great many things that fall under "security issues" than you could have imagined. You are a guest.
- Two of the most prevalent issues in these institutions are power and control. If you have any issues around this, your buttons are going to get pushed. Make sure that you are up for the task. Realize you can't plan ahead except for to expect any and everything. Are you flexible? Able to deal with total control and total chaos at the exact same time? Are you patient yet firm? Able to know what to stand up for and what you'll need to concede —and are able to access that skill under pressure? As a general rule: depending on what is happening that day with the staff and/or youth your program may or may not happen and there is nothing you can do about it. Depending on what is happening that day with the staff and/or youth your program may or may not happen and there is something you can do about it. Learn to know the difference!

- And then there is the issue of change. The youth can be greatly affected by changes in staff, routine, etc. There can be a lot of change and turnover of youth. Youth can be removed in the middle of your program, in the middle of their most profound moment, etc. Learn to be even more flexible. Develop an even better sense of humor.

READY TO GO?

- You've found one ally, and hopefully in the process of getting into the institution you have met more people. Next you need an ally who works in the institution, or who has worked in there and who can help lead you through the process of starting the group and working with the youth. Think about finding someone who has a role similar to yours in the way they interface with probation staff/youth such as a teacher. If you can't find someone at your particular institution, talk to one of the librarians who are already providing services to this population for support/feedback.
- Remember that your "new" ideas may have been tried or implemented before. Make sure you ask staff as well as administrators about any history. Staff may have been there longer than the administrators and know more about what has gone on in the past and also the actual daily operations.

WORKING WITH THE YOUTH:

- Many youth in institutions are abused or have been abused. Remember that these youth might not have a lot of family or other support; be mindful of keeping the discussion "real" but not restimulating.
- Write up simple expectations and rules for the group. Make sure it is something they have basic control over (i.e. they may not have control over attending each session if there is a lockdown, they are in court, etc). Write the expectations and rules and ask if they have any they want to add.
- Find out what positive things that the institution uses to work with the youth and incorporate into your program.
- One of the best ways to deal with an acting out youth is to walk towards them and have eye contact with them while you **continue** with the lesson plan. If a youth is needy (i.e. acting out, asking a million questions, and in general making sure they are the center of attention), stand by them so that all eyes of the class are on them. Rather than have their unmet needs run the show, keep your focus and give them the attention they need by standing near them, walking among them, looking them in the eye, etc.
- If the above doesn't work, don't be afraid to establish boundaries and to enforce them. Ask the staff what the consequences are. Often the youth get "room time," then a write up, etc. (There will be different words/levels in different institutions). Understand the system that they have of "accountability" or consequences for the youth. While it may not be something

you would ever do, or even make sense to you, it is the rules that they live by and understand. Sometimes you are going to *have* to send a youth out, give them room time or whatever and show them that you understand and will enforce the rules. Often times this population will test you mercilessly until you do this. Once you do this, and don't try to be "kind" or "fair" or "reason" with them, but instead show that you *do* mean business, and will do what it takes to have a successful class, they will generally respect you, calm down and your whole class can proceed beautifully.

- The youth may present with personas that you find intimidating or scary: thug, gangsters, don't give a &*%\$, manipulating or threatening persona. While it is true you are working with youth that have little impulse control and can be violent, for the most part if you relate to them as a caring human being they will respond as such.
- If the youth are having a hard time "relating" to a book, do a writing exercise and have them write about themselves. Make sure you tell them not to worry about spelling.
- Please remember confidentiality. In general, use first names only when speaking about the youth.
- Before you give **anything** to the youth, check with or let staff know first. (Find the staff that supports you and will say yes!) This includes things like paper, envelopes, and things you would never think you'd have to check with staff first about. Check with staff if bringing food is ok, and have that as a reward for after the program.
- Leave extra time to pass out paper and pencils. In most institutions you will have to count the pencils and make sure you have them all back in your possession before you leave.
- Staff might interrupt your program by 1. Participating in ways that are contrary to your goals, 2. lecturing the youth, 3. writing a youth up, 4. whatever. Find your balance of respect for the staff as well as maintaining your own standards, all the while remembering you are their guest and you need them on your side to do your job.
- Keep your eye on the future: once you are established in the institution (having worked painstakingly to establish your credibility by your excellent programming and attitude), you will have unlimited choices and options of who you work with and how your program runs.