

# Facilitating Virtual Groups for Youth at a Closed-custody Detention Centre: Associated Experiences and Navigating Challenges as a New Social Worker

Simran Arora, MSW, RSW  
Canadian Training Institute



**THE CANADIAN  
TRAINING INSTITUTE**  
"For People Helping People"

## Abstract

When working in correctional facilities, social workers encounter unique challenges while attempting to balance the needs of justice-involved individuals and the mandate of organizations (Champagne & Felizardo, 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic presents additional challenges in delivering services. This poster aims to describe the challenges associated with facilitating virtual psychoeducational groups for youth at a closed-custody detention centre. The poster outlines my experiences as a new social worker and the different ways challenges related to confidentiality, technology, and the COVID-19 pandemic were addressed. Successes resulting from the program and recommendations for future groups and practitioners are also stated.

## Overview of the Manifesting Amazing Dreams (M.A.D.) program

The M.A.D. program is an initiative of the Canadian Training Institute and is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services. The program supports youth between the ages of 12 and 20 who are involved or at risk of involvement in criminal activity, the justice system, and/or gang activity.

### Aims

- Foster pro-social leadership skills among participants to help reintegrate into society and reduce recidivism.
- Address dynamic criminogenic factors (antisocial behaviours, substance use, mental health concerns, negative influences, etc.) (Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2005).

### Models of Practice

The program delivers psychoeducational sessions and follows a structured curriculum. It utilizes the principles of Motivational Interviewing (MI) (Miller & Rollnick, 2012), Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014), and Cognitive-Behavioural Theory (CBT) (Fenn & Byrne, 2013) to encourage change.

### Programming for youth placed in detention

Sessions were conducted once a week for 1.5 hours and 17 weeks in total. Participants were compensated for attending sessions. During the program, participants gathered in a room and the sessions were presented on a screen. Sessions focused on psychoeducation and skill-building. Some session topics included:

- Problem Solving
- Effective Communication
- Anger Management
- Mental Health
- Addictions
- Goal Setting
- Understanding Consequences

## Challenges

- **COVID-19 pandemic restrictions** - We were unable to facilitate groups in person due to the pandemic and the lockdown guidelines. This limited our ability to connect with the youth, address their individual needs, and deliver many group based activities.
- **Confidentiality** - The participants did not have access to personal laptops and were unable to present themselves on camera due to confidentiality concerns at the detention centre. This made it challenging to recognize the person speaking and to conduct virtual activities that typically took place on Zoom for non-detained youth.
- **Technological difficulties** - It was difficult to hear each other because the computer was placed far from the participants and the staff were not able to move it closer. Difficulties in communication presented challenges in guiding the session, delivering the content, and building rapport. Frequently asking the participants to repeat themselves also caused frustration and impatience.
- **Impacts on myself as a new social worker** - I was excited to start the sessions as I saw this as an opportunity to work with a new group and further enhance my facilitation skills. Upon learning about the aforementioned challenges, I experienced imposter syndrome (Urwin, 2018). I worried about appearing incompetent and not being able to meet the expectations of everyone involved. I questioned my ability to facilitate the sessions and I worried about the impacts of these challenges on group dynamics. I was also unsure about completing documentation, creating plans, and recognizing voices (a skill I did not learn in school).

## Navigating Challenges

- **Learning from and with others** - When debriefing with the co-facilitator, I realized that I was not alone. She shared similar concerns regarding the previously mentioned challenges and encouraged me to observe as she had interacted with the youth in person. She also offered reassurance and collaboratively brainstormed solutions with the staff at the centre and myself. Expressing my thoughts to my supervisor and the co-facilitator also helped me focus, learn new skills, and feel more confident and hopeful.
- **Building rapport with the participants** - Acknowledging the challenges we were experiencing, practicing transparency, and utilizing the strengths-based approach (Saleebey, 2006; Ian Wormer & Boes, 1999) helped navigate challenges, built rapport, and encouraged collaboration. The participants began to offer honest feedback and suggestions. One participant suggested purchasing a Bluetooth microphone and another recommended including additional discussion questions during sessions.
- **Optimizing use of other technology** - The participants' suggestion to purchase a Bluetooth mic and speaker was most helpful. The equipment enhanced our ability to hear each other which significantly helped with facilitating the sessions and engaging the participants.
- **Adopting a flexible, discussion-based facilitation approach** - For many participants, this group was a new opportunity to gain pro-social skills and this process can be uncomfortable. Therefore, being flexible, checking-in when needed, and making room for participants to discuss their feelings and thoughts allowed for richer discussions, resolved concerns and conflict, and enabled participants to learn from one another. The participants also appeared engaged and focused when encouraged to contribute.
- **Managing personal anxieties** - I was able to address the anxieties I experienced by practicing self-compassion (Neff, 2003), planning ahead, focusing on professional development, and debriefing with colleagues. Setting boundaries while working from home included sharing my calendar with colleagues and keeping it updated along with focusing on tasks that required lower energy after sessions and ending work at 5pm. This allowed time for self-care and self-reflection which helped me feel re-energized and motivated.

## Successes

- **Enhanced relationships** - Collaboration, communication, and perseverance, resulted in stronger relationships with the detention centre and colleagues. The centre expressed interest in continuing groups and the next group has been scheduled!
- **Personal and professional growth** - Dedicating time to professional development and self-care helped me gain better insight into my personal values and beliefs. I also added new skills and knowledge to my professional toolkit and learned other ways to practice self-care.
- **Evaluation results** - Four out of eight participants were able to provide feedback as the others were either released or transferred to another centre. The participants completed the feedback on the last session and the survey consisted of open- and closed-ended questions. See Table 1. for quantitative results. The answers to open-ended questions highlighted that the participants' favourite part about the program was learning about finances and employment. When asked what they would change about the program, most stated "nothing".

**Table 1. Quantitative results (n=4)**

<i>Highest rated topics</i>	Employer expectations (50%) Financial Literacy (50%)
<i>"Program facilitators were knowledgeable and respectful"</i>	Strongly Agree (25%) Agree (75%)
<i>"I learned things that I can apply to my life"</i>	Strongly agree (50%) Unsure (50%)
<i>Average program rating</i>	3.75/5

## Recommendations

- **Group process** - Make more time to get to know the participants through check-in, check-out, and icebreaker activities in each session. Offer participants opportunities to provide feedback during sessions. Reflect and adapt according to the feedback on an ongoing basis. Provide information on sources of support and encourage participants to utilize these resources. Ensure that program activities and facilitators are inclusive, encourage collaboration, and empower participants. For example, encourage participants to collectively solve a problem. As facilitators, use inclusive language and bring awareness to individual and group strengths and capacities.
- **Pay extra attention to group dynamics** - Given that it is particularly challenging to gauge nonverbal cues in a virtual setting, keep additional track of who is talking, when they are talking, how often they are participating, and who is not talking. Focus on tone of voice, information being shared, and the language being used as well. Reflect on parts of sessions that do not provoke a response and ones that raise questions and concerns along with ones that stimulate participants and receive positive responses. To engage quieter participants, ask for their opinions directly and utilize the principles of MI (Miller & Rollnick, 2012) to elicit responses
- **For social workers** - Dedicate time for collaboration, professional development, self-care, and self-reflection. Research, develop, and incorporate strategies for trauma-informed distance learning (Pate, 2020) in Social Work practice. Invest in applicable and safe technological advances. Approach challenges with an open, curious, patient, and flexible mindset.

## Conclusion

There is a growing need for social workers and trauma-informed interventions within criminal justice settings (Saj, 2017; Skinner-Osei, Mangan, Liggett, Kerrigan, & Levenson, 2019), specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic as its impacts can be collectively traumatic (Public Health Ontario, 2020). Skills-based groups utilizing the principles of MI, CBT (Adler, Edwards, Scally, Gill, Punikis, Gekoski, & Horvath, 2016), and TIC (Vivrette, Hebert, & Liberman, 2020) have proven to reduce recidivism and positively impact the well-being of justice-involved youth. Additionally, according to the Youth Criminal Justice Act (2002), engaging in timely interventions and extrajudicial measures "are often the most appropriate and effective ways to address youth crime" (s. 4 (a)). Hence, to support the well-being of these youth, it is essential to provide similar psychoeducational group programs while adopting the principles of MI (Miller & Rollnick, 2012), TIC (SAMHSA, 2014), and CBT (Fenn & Byrne, 2013). Moreover, the pandemic has presented unique challenges for youth and staff in detention centres (Miller, 2020; Vivrette et al., 2020). Building a sense of community and connectedness by delivering immersive virtual programs can mitigate these challenges and promote pro-social leadership skills among these youth. Through communication and collaboration, it is also possible to address the challenges related to virtual programming and the pandemic and further apply this learning to hybrid or in-person programming.