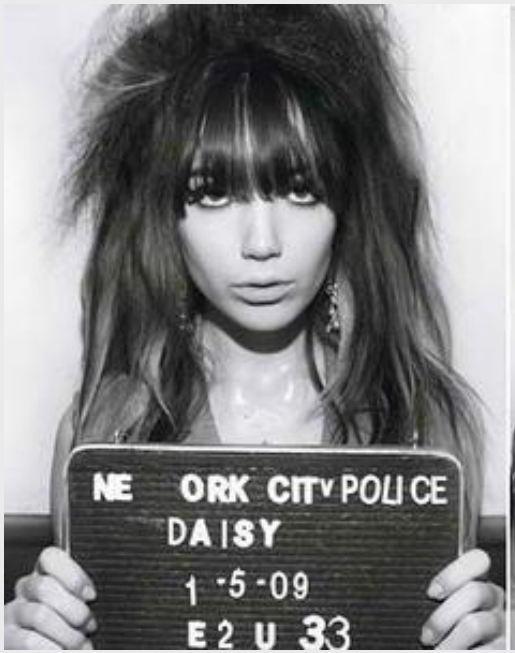
Crossing the Line: Making a Difference With Girls Who Act Out



Presented by
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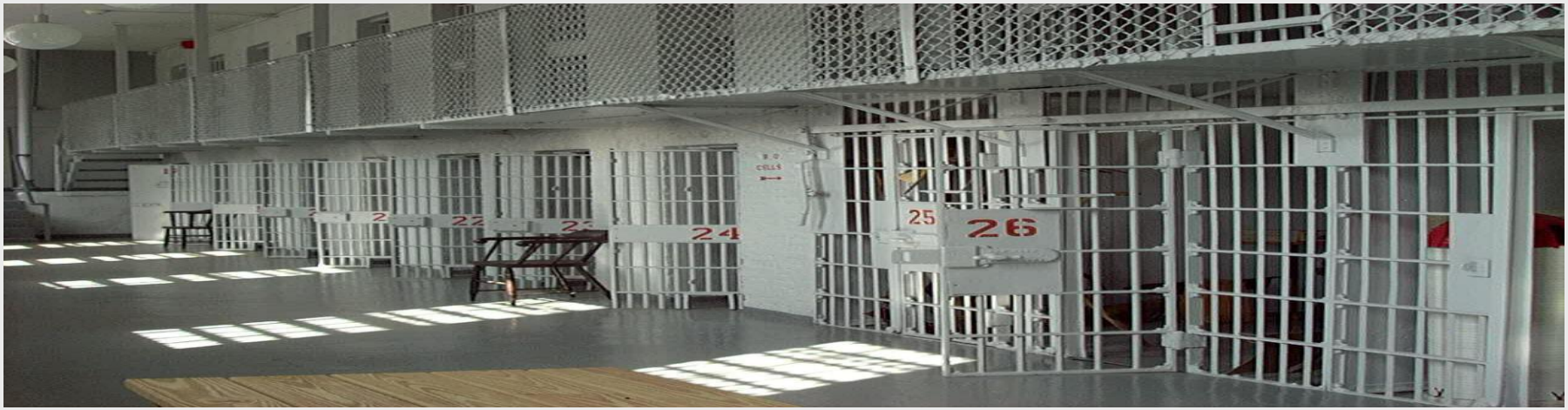
Female Adolescent Offenders



Between 1987 and 1996, arrests of adolescent females increased 76% compared to 46% among adolescent males.

Between 1981 and 1997, arrests of female adolescents for **violent** crimes increased 103% compared to 27% for males.

Between 1990 and 1999, delinquency cases involving drug offenses for females increased by 107%.

Why the Increase in Crimes and Violence among Girls?

Why the Increase in Crimes and Violence among Girls?

"Cause" of increase in arrests among girls disputed:

1. changing societal response to girls' aggression,
2. re-labeling of girls' family conflicts
3. gender bias: Misdemeanors

Offenses Differ

- Girls more likely to fight with a family member, boys more likely to fight with friends/strangers (Girls Inc., 1996).
- Girls are disproportionately charged with status offenses,
- Detained for less serious offenses than boys, and
- More likely to return to detention for probation and technical violations (Juvenile Detention alternative Initiative study, as cited in ABA 2001).

Protective Factors & Risk Factors for Girls during Adolescence

- Protective:

Caring Adults

School Connectedness

School Success

Religiosity

- Risk:

Physical Assault

Sexual Assault

Neglect by parent or caregiver

Neighborhood disadvantage

Characteristics of Girls in the Juvenile Justice System

- 2/3 of girls are of color, primarily Black and Latino (Children's Defense Fund, 2003).
- High levels of:
  - Family dysfunction
  - Trauma and sexual abuse
  - Mental health and substance abuse problems
  - High-risk sexual behaviors
  - School problems
  - Affiliation with deviant peers.

Family Dysfunction

- Greater family dysfunction than their male counterparts (Chamberlain & Moore, 2003; Dakof 2000; Riehman et al., 2003)

- Families characterized by disengagement and parental rejection, intensive parent-adolescent conflict, and parental substance use (Acoca, 1998; Dakof 2000).

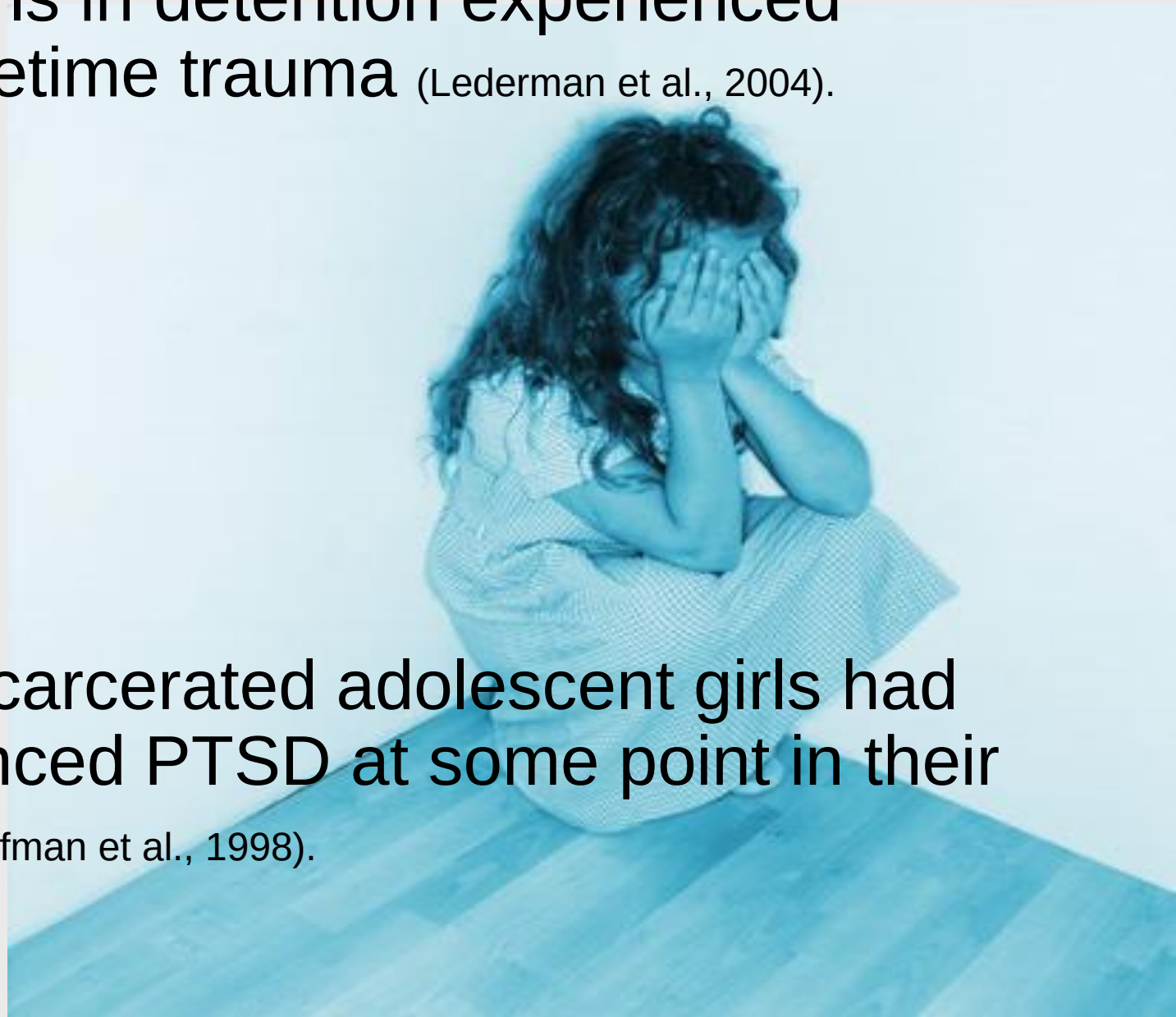
Sexual Abuse

- 73% of girls entering the correctional system reported being victims of abuse (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon 1998).

- Other estimates of sexual abuse among delinquent girls ranges from 25-70%.

Trauma

84% of girls in detention experienced major lifetime trauma (Lederman et al., 2004).



65% of incarcerated adolescent girls had experienced PTSD at some point in their lives (Cauffman et al., 1998).

Mental Health

Delinquent females have high rates of depression, anxiety and substance abuse problems.

75% of detained girls reported mental health problems (Teplin et al., 2002).

Substance Abuse

- 75% of detained girls reported regular use of alcohol and/or drugs (Acoca 1999).

34% of detained girls had a substance abuse disorder (Lederman et al., 2004).

High-Risk Sexual Behavior

- Early sexual activity
- Sexual abuse associated with early initiation of sex.
- Older male partners.
- Less condom use among delinquent girls.

School and Peer Problems

80% + of detained girls have experienced school expulsion, suspension or being held back a grade. Acoca 1998; Funk 1999).

Delinquent girls affiliate with peers who are delinquent and substance users (Matsueda & Anderson 1998; Hubbard & Pratt 2002).

Developmental Factors

- Early sexual maturation among girls associated with:

Increased substance use

Delinquency

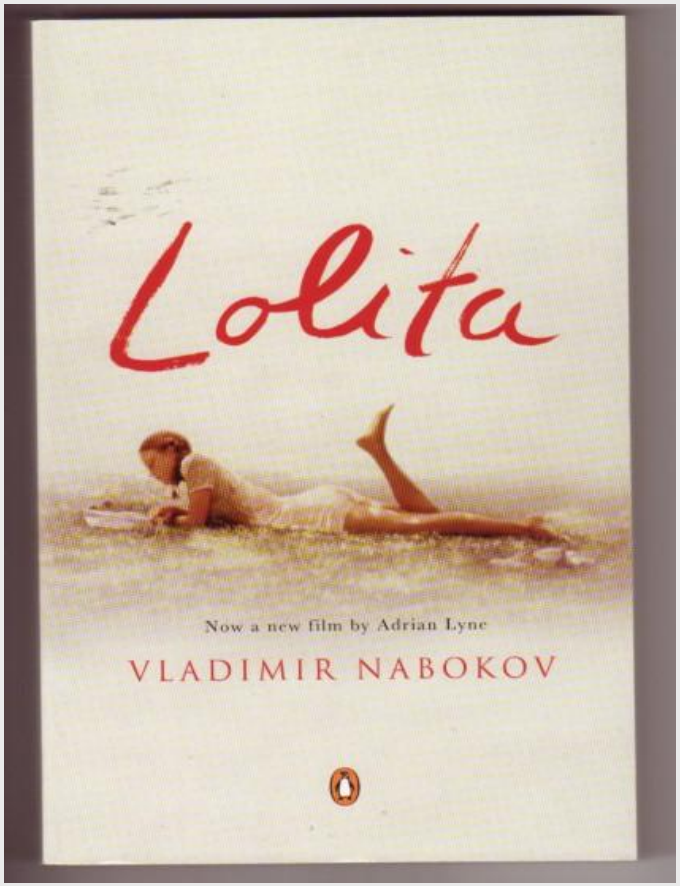
Depression

Body image disturbances

Conduct problems

Lower academic success

Sources: Caspi et al., 1993; Stattin & Magnusson 1990, Graber et al., 1997



Relationship Issues

- Peer groups of substance-using girls
- Sexual relationships = self-esteem
- Social support
- Dependency on opposite-sex relationships

Female Adolescent Sex Offenders

Female Adolescent Sex Offenders

- Exhibit greater variability in their sexual arousal and behavior patterns than adult male/female sex offenders.
- Similar to their male adolescent counterparts in the level of diversity that exists within their population.
- Commit a wide range of illegal sexual behaviors, ranging from limited exploratory behaviors committed largely out of curiosity to repeated aggressive acts.
- Are often otherwise well-functioning youth with limited behavioral problems.

- The most common sexual offenses are non aggressive acts that occur during a care-giving activity

- Typical victim is a 5 year old child.
- The victims are most frequently acquaintances or relatives.
- Male and female children appear to be equally at risk for sexual victimization

Treatment of Adolescent Female Sex Offenders

Traditional male ASO treatment methods

Treatment needs for female ASOs:

- victimization history,
- relationship development,
- sexual health.

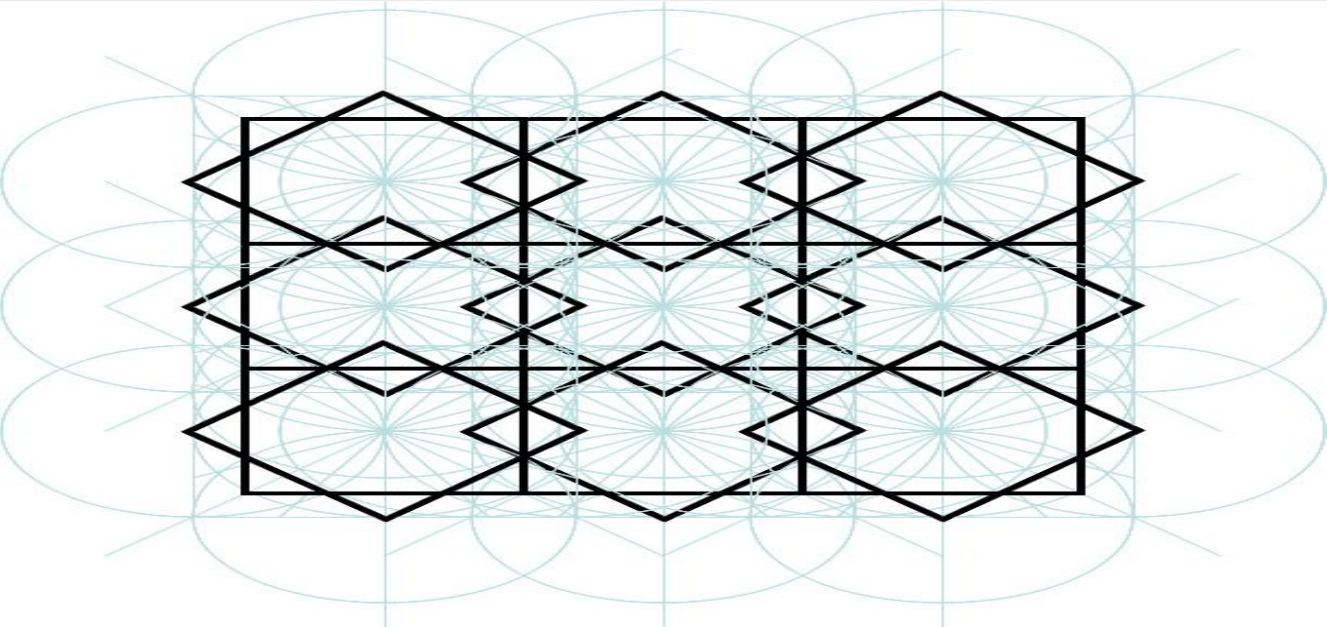
"While the female ASO's illegal sexual behavior should be a central component of therapy, other areas, such as post traumatic stress disorder or depression, may need to be addressed depending on the adolescent."

National Center on Sexual Behavior of Youth, www.ncsby.org

What Gender Differences Mean for the Treatment Process

Boys:

- **interested in the rules of the world,**
- **their place in the structure of the world**
- **how to move ahead** or gain power within that structure.



Translation:

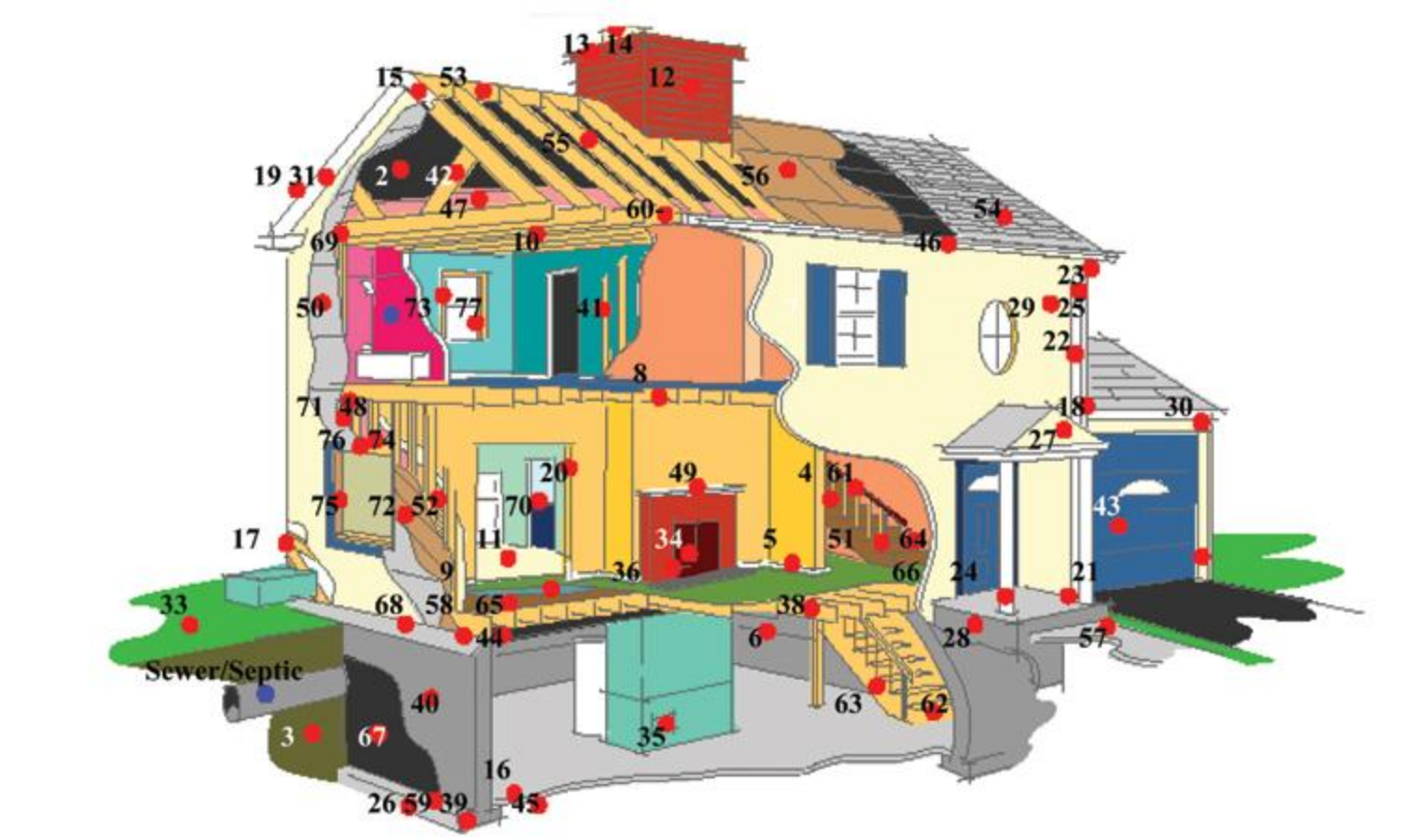
Programs for boys are more successful when they focus on rules and offer ways to advance within a structured environment.

Girls
form identity primarily in relation to other people,
interested in what “relationship” means and how it works

Translation:

Programs for girls are more successful when they focus on relationships and offer ways to master their lives while keeping these relationships intact.

Best Practices in Programs for Adolescent Females



Provide emotional and physical safety

- Give girls “safe space” in which they can talk about their issues-be aware of relational aggression.

Be culturally appropriate

- Be aware of different cultural perspectives; attempt to respond as diversely as possible.
- Be aware of the culture of the family of origin as well as the culture of the community, ethnicity, race, etc

Be relationship based

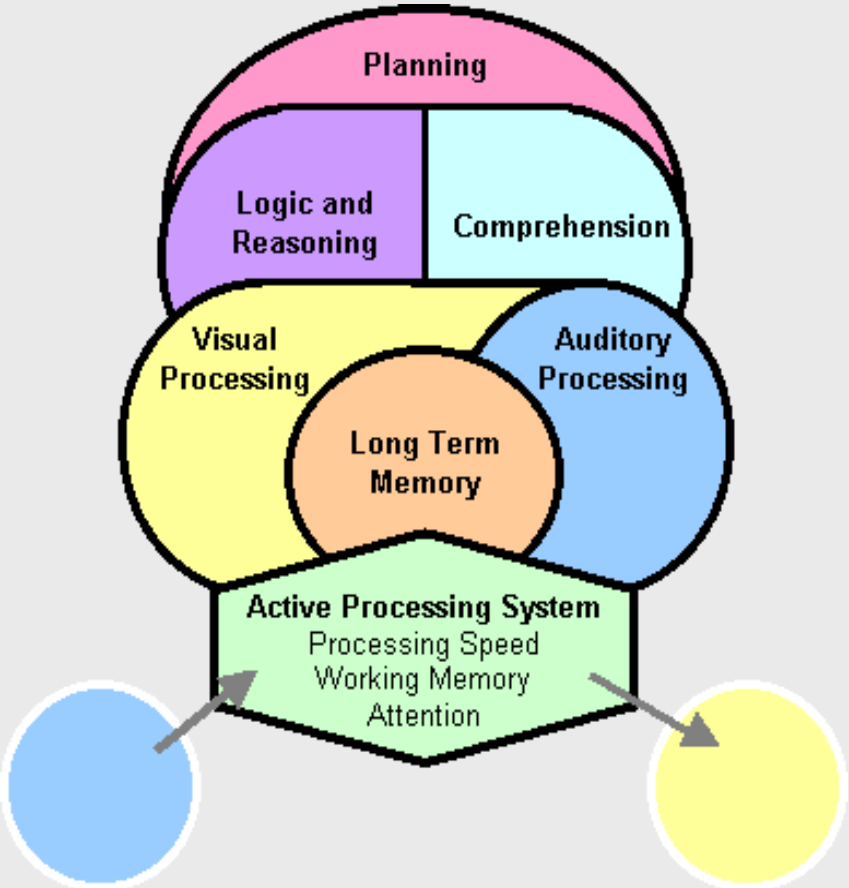
- Develop alignment and partnership with youth
- The strength of the relationship provides the support to risk new behaviors

Provide positive female role models and mentors

Girls in the JJ lack “everyday heroes”

Address the abuse

- Provide groups, teach skills, practice, practice, practice skills.



Be strength based

- Use Latessa's principles of 4/1

- Share a perspective of resiliency: identify skills that are already present.

Address sexuality, including pregnancy and parenting

Many of the girls have a great deal of experience sexually and very little accurate information.

We tend to teach what *not* to do and fail to teach what *to* do

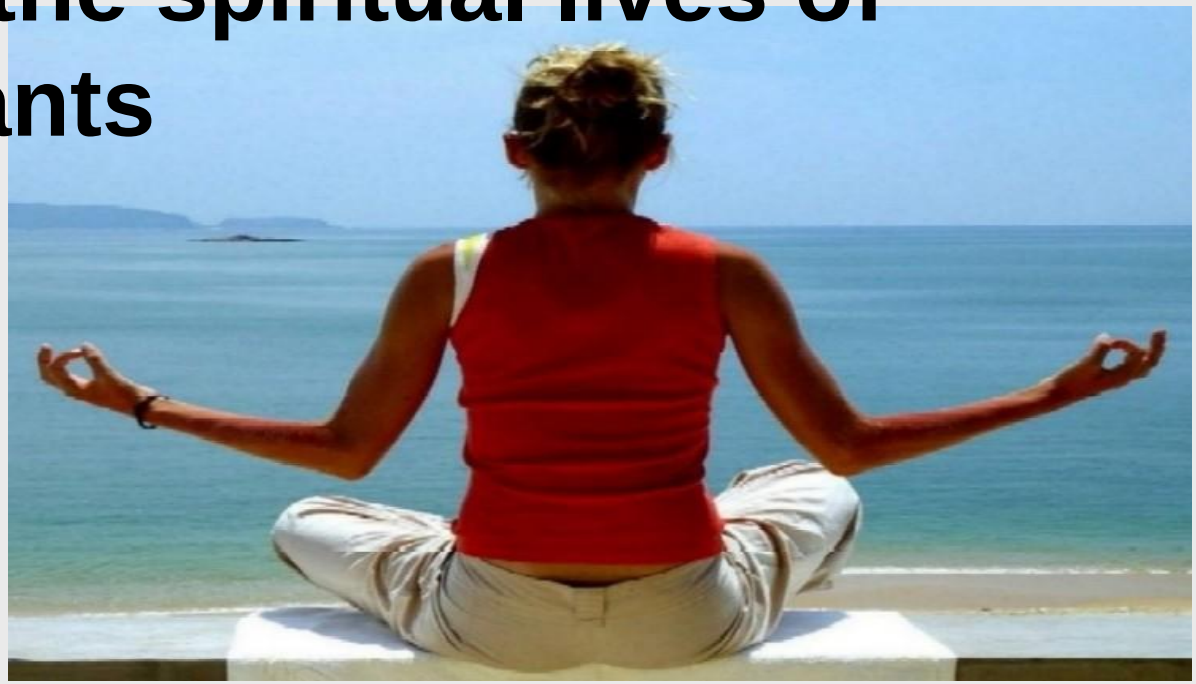
Provide equitable education and vocational opportunities

- Education + skills = a fair playing field

Address their unique health needs

- Teach healthy life styles
- Down-play appearance
- Educate girls about media
- Address eating disorders

Nurture the spiritual lives of participants



- Provide opportunities for spiritual expression: writing groups, poetry groups, directed journaling
- Seek out volunteers from the creative community (writers, performers, creative writing instructors)
- Encourage values clarification; discuss issues within the context of self-others-community

Involve the families

- Work to resolve family issues
- How will the family help (?) with discharge transition and carry-over of skills to new environments

From “Providing Gender–specific Services for Adolescent Female Offenders” by Iowa commission on the Status of Women-1999.

Things to remember:

- We treat people, not crimes
- Transference and Counter-transference
- You are the good coach, mentor and parent
- Sometimes you are the bad coach, mentor and parent
- Girls are people too.