

Announcer: Welcome to Tram Talks, a little taste of Deakin University here in the world's first mobile lecture theatre. You've chosen to listen to podcast number 5, 'Youth in Prison'. Dr. Sophie Goldingay will speak about the challenges that women and young offenders face behind bars.

Dr. Goldingay: I'd like to share with you today some of the challenges I've observed for young women prisoners and young men in custody. I'm a social worker by background. I spent many years working in a prison. And I noticed some real similarities and things while I was doing that.

One of the things that I noticed...I'm going to talk about them just one by one just hoping that it'll give you a little sense of what it's like there, because they talked to me about what a day in their life was and what had actually led them into their offending. What a lot of people said was that when they were doing their offending they hadn't actually been able to manage or regulate their own behaviour and that they expressed quite a lot of remorse about that and they wished that they hadn't done it. The other thing that they noticed was they tended to seek out older prisoners while they're there, people who are auntie and mother roles, to try and help them to regulate their own behaviour and stay out of trouble. The other thing that young people would tell me is that they tended to be quite surprised because they hadn't been able to weigh up the social situation that they were in when the offense was happening. They'd perhaps been manipulated or hadn't seen what the consequences were going to be.

So what that really said to me is that young people, well, not all young people but some, don't necessarily do offending because they're trying to get away with as much as they can or because they're bad or naughty. For a lot of young people, my observation is that they couldn't actually help their offending. They had real difficulties in self-regulation and problem-solving and anticipating consequences. So this has led me actually to try to investigate some alternative ways of thinking about young prisoners and some alternative ways that we could respond to them while they're in prison.

So one of the privileges, I think, of being in a university is you've actually got access to cutting-edge research as well as reports that you can get off the Net. One of the reports that I did get a hold of was done by Corrections, and they observed that 42% of male prisoners have actually got an acquired brain injury and 33% of female prisoners have got an acquired brain injury. That's a significant proportion. In another study of young males, 46% were identified by speech pathologists as having a language impairment. And these particular scholars noticed the link between language impairment, self-control and regulation, and the ability to take perspective of others and understand social

situations. There's also been a number of reports, of course, talking about the high rates of fetal alcohol syndrome. And of course again, that leads to some difficulties in the ability to think through situations.

So what I noticed in common with these young people is that they might have a difficulty in neuropsychological functioning. So I'll call it a neuropsychological disability if you like. And one of the things that I noticed while I was working in prison is that the type of therapies that are delivered to all prisoners might not be able to be used by people who have these neuropsychological difficulties. Cognitive behavioural therapy works really well for neurotypical populations, but my observation was that young people who had these difficulties just couldn't absorb it and they couldn't necessarily take what they learned out into the real world.

So that has led me to try and find alternative ways, and I've come across this exciting new research by a person called Bruce Perry, who's talked about neurosequential development of the brain. And he talks about the process that typically developing children go through when they're growing and how they use play to develop those parts of the brain involved in problem-solving, consequential thinking, and self-regulation. So from reading that, it made me think and my colleague who works with me that there may be ways to actually address some of these difficulties that young people have, even though they've already grown up, if you like, they're already adolescents. But the fact is Norman Doidge's work shows that the brain is plastic and that interventions done at any stage in life can actually be effective, that we can continue learning and growing as we get older.

And so building on this notion, we developed a program for young people just in schools who might be identified by their teachers as having social difficulties. We thought that these groups might be at particular risk of actually ending up being on the wrong side of the law. So while we're working with these young people in high schools, we test them pre our intervention and then we do an intervention which involves them being invited to be a movie director. And they have to imagine creating a character. They have to work with their peers to develop the script and narrative, a storyboard, and to actually work together to film a movie. While they're doing this, our observation is they really get involved and they really play. They don't even realise they're receiving therapy. And the movies were really cool too, actually.

But one of the things that we did after we did this intervention, it was 8 to 12 weeks, was we tested them again. We used particular instruments to test social functioning and self-regulation, problem-solving and consequential and flexible

thinking and we noticed that they had a significant improvement in those things as a result of our intervention.

So we're really excited about that here at Deakin. We're hoping that this will provide some real sustainable social participation therapy for young people who might have difficulties in this area. We're really excited. We'd love you to join us.

Announcer: Thanks to Dr. Sophie Goldingay. This has been another Tram Talk from the world's first mobile lecture theatre. Just a small sample of what's available at Deakin University. Visit study.deakin.edu.au to learn more.