

# Developmentally-Grounded Approaches to Juvenile Probation Practice: A Case Study<sup>1</sup>

*Sarah Cusworth Walker*

*Esteban Valencia*

*Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences*

*University of Washington School of Medicine*

*Susan Miller*

*Kate Pearson*

*Cody Jewell*

*Jessica Tran*

*Angie Thompson*

*Pierce County Juvenile Court*

**JUVENILE PROBATION IS** the most common service ordered by the court, reaching approximately 2,500,000 youth per year in the United States (Sickmund, Sladky, & Kang, 2018). Probation can have a significant impact on a youth's future developmental trajectory (Minor & Elrod, 1994; Young, Farrell, & Taxman, 2012) and is worthy of increased attention to ensure it is aligned with promoting youth development. Recent calls to examine the alignment of juvenile probation with principles of youth development have yielded theory-based guideposts for modifying practice (Butts et al., 2007; Goldstein, NeMoyer, Gale-Bentz, Levick, & Feierman, 2016; Schwartz, 2018). Yet, little is known about how these principles can be effectively and feasibly translated into real-world practice.

Probation originated as an alternative to detention and operated outside of the courts' direct supervision (Schwalbe, 2012). As the model grew in popularity, it was increasingly brought under the administration of the courts and operated as an extension of the courts' authority in the community. Consequently,

the primary purpose of probation has shifted over time, from rehabilitation to compliance monitoring, with the lines between these two functions often unclear. As noted by Schwalbe (2012), theories guiding approaches to probation are contradictory, and there are wide differences in observed practice among probation officers (Skeem & Manchak, 2008). The two philosophical ends of the probation spectrum are control and care, with practices at either end bearing little resemblance to each other (Paparozzi & Gendreau, 2005). On the control end, probation practice is focused on surveillance through the monitoring of court orders. Officers act as extensions of the court's authority and access the court's authority through violations that lead to detention time or extended sentences. The surveillance approach is the most common approach to probation (Skeem & Manchak, 2008), despite being generally ineffective in reducing recidivism (Gendreau, Goggin, Cullen, & Andrews, 2000; Hyatt & Barnes, 2014).

At the other end of the continuum, the care orientation to probation approaches supervision largely as social work. Officers aligned with this approach may service referrals to rehabilitative programs (Taxman, 2008) and/

or directly provide skills coaching to probationers (Whetzel, Paparozzi, Alexander, & Lowenkamp, 2011). Improvements in assessment and referral typically involve the implementation of structured risk and needs assessments to guide service referrals based on the risk of re-offense and personal risk factors (Vincent, Guy, & Grisso, 2012; Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2011; Schwalbe, 2012). Examples include the recent NIDA-funded JJ-Trials' effort to increase the identification and referral of youth with substance use needs to external treatment providers (Knight et al., 2015), and organizational change initiatives focused on the implementation of validated risk and needs assessments (Guy, Nelson, Fusco-Morin, & Vincent, 2014; Vincent et al., 2012).

Efforts to reform the therapeutic elements of probation supervision directly have more often been studied with adult rather than youth probationers. These efforts show promising effects (Smith, Schweitzer, Labrecque, & Latessa, 2012; Trotter & Evans, 2012). For example, a study by Raynor & Vanston (2016) found that probation officers' use of relationship skills and "change-promoting" skills was associated with significantly lower

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reconviction rates. Overall, however, the use of problem-solving, goal-setting, and emotional regulation skills are generally infrequently used or endorsed by juvenile probation officers as a core job function (Schwalbe, 2012; Trotter & Evans, 2012).

The study of the integration of rehabilitative principles within probation practice is occurring simultaneously with calls to integrate principles of adolescent development in all facets of juvenile justice practice (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges [NCJFCJ], 2018; Schwartz, 2018). The National Research Council released a report in 2012 calling for the reformation of juvenile justice to align with positive youth development principles, including the use of “clearly specified interventions rooted in knowledge about adolescent development and tailored to the particular adolescent’s needs and social environment” (p. 10). In 2015, the Annie E. Casey foundation put out an RFP for probation sites interested in developing innovative and transformative models of probation supervision as a response to a number of concerns about the ineffectiveness of traditional surveillance models (Latessa, Smith, Schweitzer, & Labrecque, 2013; Lipsey, 2009). In the foundation’s vision, juvenile probation should be limited to youth at the highest risk of re-offense, caseloads should be smaller, and there should be a greater focus on positive development, community engagement, and family support (Mendel & Bishop, 2018). Similarly, in 2017, the NCJFCJ published a resolution calling for the integration of adolescent brain development into juvenile and family courts. In the resolution, the NCJFCJ noted the inherent differences between youth and adults and called for individualized probation services and conditions, family engagement, and community partnerships.

Contemporary juvenile probation practice largely reflects the approach developed for adult probationers, and distinctions in practice between the two populations are not commonly made in the general literature. Consequently, juvenile probation practices are not typically informed by developmental differences in information and emotional processing (King, Fleming, Monahan, & Catalano, 2011), the influence of peers (Butters, 2004), or the influence of families on youth behavior (Chan, Kelly, & Toumbourou, 2013; Dembo, Williams, Wothke, Schmeidler, & Brown, 1992; Guo, Hill, Hawkins, Catalano, & Abbott, 2002). To date, efforts to improve juvenile probation practice have largely focused on

improving methods of treatment identification and referral, not directly on the practice of probation supervision itself. Little is known about what developmentally informed probation might look like and whether it would be feasible to implement.

National calls for fundamental reform in juvenile probation recognize the need for adult models to be tailored to better support adolescent development. These calls explicitly or implicitly value a rehabilitative approach to probation rather than surveillance models. At the same time, the changes called for by these influential policy and funding organizations are significant and will require fundamental shifts in the conceptualization and management of probation. In this article, we discuss the process of developing a developmentally-informed model of juvenile probation and examine strengths and challenges of the approach with lessons for other jurisdictions attempting similar reforms.

### Overview of Opportunity-Based Probation

The project was a collaboration between the Pierce County Juvenile Court in Washington State and the University of Washington. Pierce County is the second largest jurisdiction in the state, spanning urban, suburban, and rural settings. The probation department has 19 field officers and 2 supervisors, serving 418 youth a year. The project was funded by a competitive Annie E. Casey Probation Transformation grant in which the court articulated a vision for more family-engagement and developmentally informed probation practice. Pierce County had been involved with the Foundation’s Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative from 2002 and had already demonstrated the capacity to make substantial organizational changes within the area of detention practice and policy. The county applied for the grant because they saw youth returning to probation multiple times even after receiving rehabilitative, evidence-based services. While unsure of what direction reforms might take, the court wanted help in their efforts to support longer term youth development while reducing caseload size and reoffending.

The University of Washington team (PI and research staff) used codesign to develop the model with the court, a specific research to practice methodology (Jagosh et al., 2012; Verbiest, 2018). Co-design is a participatory strategy used to enhance several aspects of program development, including

1) acceptability and feasibility for real-world practice; 2) long-term buy-in and ownership within the development site; and 3) reciprocal learning for the research team about the business demands and expectations of practice sites. In codesign, the researchers’ role is to locate and synthesize research findings relevant to the community agency’s goals and assist in integrating these principles within real-world programming (Jagosh et al., 2012). The design team included a research psychologist with specialization in adolescent behavioral health and public systems (first author), a probation supervisor, and four probation officers representing a mix of different probation caseload types (sex offender, low/medium/high risk, mental health, substance use). The workgroup also brought in additional stakeholders at different times as needed, including support in information technology, research analysis (second author), and probation management staff.

The design process occurred in four phases: development, piloting, and evaluation and refinement (Martin, 2012). In the development phase, the researcher facilitated biweekly and then monthly workgroup meetings that began with mapping system values and reviewing the research literature on behavior change and motivation principles for adolescents (six months). The workgroup members were also asked to brainstorm techniques and strategies they observed working well to motivate youth, promote success in meeting conditions of probation, and promote improvements in well-being and functioning, as well as areas they wanted to see improve in youth and caregiver engagement and interactions with probation. These values and observations were then discussed in light of available research on adolescent development (Steinberg, 2007), behavior change principles (Higgins & Silverman, 1999; Kok et al., 2015; Moller et al., 2017), and behavioral health treatment strategies for adolescents (Morean et al., 2015; Whittle et al., 2014). The group also reviewed some programmatic examples of efforts to promote more effective behavior change and motivation in probation, including an adult probation model, JSTEPS, developed by Taxman and colleagues (Taxman, 2012), and contingency management for addiction treatment for adolescents (Henggeler et al., 2008).

After reviewing and discussing this literature, the workgroup came to consensus on a set of guiding principles (Table 1, next page) related to rewards, positive recognition, family

support, and preparing stakeholders to accept a new view of probation. These included six principles of adolescent development (drive towards independence, heightened responsibility to rewards, underdeveloped cognitive control, underdeveloped capacity for forward thinking, sensitivity to home environment/parenting, strongly influenced by peers). At least one practical strategy was identified for each research principle. For example, the practical strategies of “youth shapes goals and probation plan with the probation officer” and “probation focuses on connecting youth to community opportunities” were identified under the research principles of “Drive towards independence.”

### The Prototype Model

In the next phase of design (six months), the workgroup developed a prototype model by applying these guiding principles to the probation case management system already in place. The existing case management system was a structured approach to the identification of needs and triage to services guided by the Risk, Needs, Responsibility model (Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2006). An exhaustive description of the previous model is outside the scope of this paper, but the workgroup focused on elements of the model that could be reasonably adapted without straining the definitions of the internal and state quality assurance requirements. These constraints included: (1) maintaining the general structure of completing an assessment and case plan to guide probation services, (2) retaining a focus on reducing criminogenic needs, (3) meeting the conditions of probation necessary for the youth to have their record sealed (completing restitution and/or community service hours), (4) filing warrants or probation violations for behaviors considered to be flagrant violations of court orders (not residing in an ordered placement/home, failing multiple urinalysis tests, or failing to meet with the probation officer for supervision meetings), and (5) continuing to use evidence-based practices available through court services when indicated. The constraints imposed by these requirements were used as a framework to develop a prototype model that met the guiding values and principles identified by the workgroup.

The prototype of OBP (Table 2) integrated new practices within the four phases of typical probation: pretrial, assessment, case planning, and supervision. The new practices reflected guiding principles around (1) family

engagement, (2) structured goal setting, (3) rewards, and (4) positive youth development.

In pretrial, the probation officer provided a brief overview of the OBP model to the youth and parent while they were going through the court hearing process prior to receiving a disposition. During this time, the officer awarded the youth small prizes (rewards) for attending hearings and for completing any pre-disposition activities (e.g., receiving a behavioral health assessment). After disposition and being placed on probation, the PO conducted a risk/needs assessment in a meeting with the youth and caregiver in keeping with the usual probation practice to identify areas of highest needs and strengths related to identified criminogenic needs. Following the assessment meeting, the probation officer then held a separate one-on-one meeting with the caregiver for a focused discussion about the probation

process (Family Engagement). Building from research on effective family engagement strategies, this meeting focused on building rapport, clarifying caregiver concerns, and increasing the caregiver’s investment in the process. Holding this meeting separately from the assessment was considered important, because it provided a space where the PO could validate the parents’ concerns and frustrations without the youth feeling shamed or defensive. In addition to this rapport building, the probation officer discussed the parents’ most significant concerns so that they could be brought into a case planning meeting with the youth. Finally, in the caregiver meeting, the probation officer explained how any problematic or noncompliant behaviors by the youth would be handled to prepare the parent for incremental progress and a reward-based structure.

**TABLE 1.**  
**Mapping of OBP Model onto Principles of Adolescent Development**

Adolescent Development Principle	OBP Model Adaptation
Drive towards independence	Youth shapes goals and probation plan with the probation officer. Probation focuses on connecting youth to community opportunities.
Heightened responsibility to rewards	Success is reinforced with incentives meaningful to the youth.
Underdeveloped cognitive control	Success is frequently and immediately reinforced. Violations or problem behaviors are addressed rapidly.
Underdeveloped capacity for forward thinking	Only three goals are monitored weekly. Probation officers teach and coach goal setting and problem-solving skills.
Sensitive to home environment and parenting	Parent/guardians are engaged upfront as partners in probation. Parents/guardians are supported to proactively address problem behaviors and reinforce positive behaviors.
Strongly influenced by peers	Weekly goal setting and community opportunities support the youths’ transition to prosocial peers and community involvement.

**TABLE 2.**  
**Components of OBP Model by Probation Phase**

Probation Phases	Model Components
Pre-Trial	Provide OBP overview. Provide points for attending hearings, staying crime free and other goals at PC discretion.
Assessment	Conduct risk assessment as usual.
Parent Meeting	At risk assessment or another time, hold parent-only meeting. Discuss parent goals and plans for addressing “relapse” behaviors.
Feedback and Planning session	Briefly review the court order. Develop the feedback goal sheet. Ask youth to identify community opportunity and desired material rewards.
Supervision	Check in weekly, in person biweekly. Set new weekly goals to move youth towards community opportunity. Coach parents on restorative plans when youth not adherent with responsibility and probation goals. Reduce time at PC discretion following community opportunity. At the end of probation, have youth participate in quarterly graduation ceremony.

After holding an assessment and parent meeting, the PO met with both the youth and the caregiver to hold a case planning meeting where they would review the results of the risk/needs assessment using a motivational interviewing (MI) approach (Miller, 2002). Using MI is also an expectation of the non-OBP probation model for developing case plans. In OBP, the probation officer also brought in the caregiver feedback about primary areas of concern and a discussion of the youth's strengths and interests to develop goals (Structured Goal Setting) in three areas: probation goals, responsibility goals, and life goals. Probation goals reflected criminogenic needs and were broken into 1-3 concrete action steps for each week. Using a previous example, if a youth had difficulty managing anger that was driving violent behavior in the home, concrete action steps might include attending an evidence-based group treatment session during that week, identifying common anger triggers and bringing them into the supervision meeting for discussion, and identifying one specific coping skill to practice. As youth were successful with goals, the probation officer shifted them to demand slightly more of the youth. This could include practicing more difficult skills in the same goal category or shifting to a new area (e.g., school attendance). Only one major goal was identified for a youth at a time, but the goal could have up to three subgoal action steps for the week. The responsibility goal was focused on home behaviors that reflected the major area of concern of the caregiver. Identifying this goal occurred in the family meeting and was facilitated by the probation officer, who worked with the caregiver to operationalize a large expectation (e.g., helping out around the house more) into an observable and achievable weekly goal (e.g., do one load of laundry a week). The caregiver was fully responsible for monitoring this goal and letting the probation officer know on a weekly basis whether it was accomplished. The purpose of identifying this caregiver-driven goal was two-fold: To model setting concrete and achievable goals for youth, and to involve the caregivers in positive reinforcement through the awarding of weekly points.

After setting goals in the case planning meeting, the model moved to field supervision. In field supervision, the youth was awarded points and material rewards for successfully accomplishing goals (Rewards). The probation officer checked in with the youth and caregiver weekly until the youth obtained

enough points to decrease the frequency of supervision meetings. In this pilot version, points would accumulate until youth decided they wanted to cash points in for prizes. Youth could cash in points for small prizes more frequently or large prizes less frequently. Specific benchmarks of earned points also allowed the youth to earn early time off from probation and a community "opportunity" (Positive Youth Development). Community opportunities were internships, classes, jobs, and other opportunities to develop skills that aligned with the youth's interests and goals for the future.

### Current Study

The data used to study the outcomes of this model in Pierce County were primarily qualitative. We obtained this data from a focus group of the pilot project officers and four in-depth interviews with parents (2) and youth (2) who participated in the pilot. The interviewers and focus groups were designed to capture information on feasibility and acceptability of the model. Data from these interviews were summarized and discussed with the design group to inform subsequent refinements to practice. The participating subjects included five probation officers and two probation supervisors who were involved in the pilot of OBP. Three of these probation officers had been involved in the workgroup and two of the probation officers became involved at the piloting stage. One of the supervisors had also been involved extensively in the design process, while the second supervisor knew of the program primarily through his supervision of probation officers involved in the pilot. Consequently, the feedback group was mixed, with those who were involved in development and those who were trained on the model after development. As the officers were expected to deliver OBP without any additional compensation, we viewed all responses as honest assessments of whether the model was feasible to implement, regardless of potential benefits for youth. The probation officers ranged widely in experience, with a minimum of four years of experience in juvenile probation. Two of the probation officers were also involved in the court's quality assurance team and helped train other probation officers on adhering to the state standards for probation case management.

### Method

Probation officers and supervisors were asked to participate in a two-hour focus group facilitated by the research team, which included

the research facilitator of the OBP workgroup and a research assistant supervised by the facilitator. Focus group participation was voluntary, and participants were given the opportunity to submit their feedback in a non-interview format. The OBP workgroup probation supervisor and the research facilitator collaboratively developed questions to guide the focus group. These questions included: (1) How does OBP differ from your previous approach? (2) What principles in OBP have the most potential to work well to support youth development? (3) What principles seem to work well for mostly all youth and which, if any, work well for some youth and not others? (4) What needs improvement and should anything be eliminated? (5) What specialized skills might probation officers need to implement OBP correctly? and (6) What would you recommend for next steps in developing and implementing the OBP model?

The research team captured the focus group through audio recording and handwritten notes. The recordings were transcribed using an online transcription program, and reviewed by the research team for accuracy. The focus group transcript and notes were subjected to four rounds of content analysis, using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). An analyst on the research team performed the first two rounds of content coding, conferring with the research supervisor in between coding rounds. In the third round of review, the research supervisor and the research analyst discussed these codes and condensed them into general themes, which were presented to members of the OBP workgroup for a (fourth) final round of consensus. This process of triangulation (i.e., using multiple sources of information to cross-check) helped establish trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

### Findings

Content analysis of the probation focus group was oriented towards developing constructive feedback that could improve the OBP model and facilitate better program experiences for probation officers and OBP families. Through this process, four unique themes—and three subthemes—emerged (Table 3, next page) that both describe key components of the OBP model and highlight areas for model improvement: benefits of setting achievable goals; balance structure with flexibility; perceived family benefits; time and emotional resources.

*Benefits of Setting Achievable Goals*

The most commonly mentioned benefit of the model was the benefit of instituting structured goal setting within probation ( $n = 21$  comments). Probation officers noted two specific aspects of structured goal setting as particularly successful: Setting goals that are achievable within a short-term time frame and setting goals that a youth can realistically meet. The respondents mentioned that this practice of setting achievable and realistic goals provided probation officers with tools to scaffold their youth's sense of self-efficacy, with one probation officer observing that "[goal setting] gives those kids who aren't used to experiencing success the ability to experience success and then just not having pressure to...have these super drastic life-altering changes." The respondents also noted that once youth and families are able to establish their capacity to meet smaller goals, probation officers begin to scaffold prosocial growth by progressively setting larger goals: "He's a kid

who I think is really used to failing...so I set very very small [goals]...so he can get kind of a taste of success, so that when we set bigger goals later then, you know, it's easier."

*Balance Structure with Flexibility*

Probation officers also reported that the model structure was beneficial in encouraging them to be more intentional in their work with youth and families ( $n = 16$ ). Probation officers reported being more intentional in meeting with a youth's caregivers, more intentional about the structure of youth/caregiver check-ins, and more intentional about what goals they were setting for youth and families. For some, these elements were already good probation practice, but OBP helped to keep them focused: "I kind of feel, or, it's what we should be doing anyways, but, [OBP] makes you more intentional." Probation officers reported that the impact of this increased intentionality was improved confidence in their ability to engage with youth and families. At the

same time, respondents also noted that they were not always sure how much flexibility they had to alter components of the model ( $n = 13$ ). One probation officer cautioned that "the [OBP] structure makes it that we are so intentional that I think it could get in the way for some kids." For example, the OBP model indicates that probation officers should meet with youth every week for structured goal setting and general check-ins. However, not all probation officers felt that meeting weekly was an effective use of time, particularly with youth who were demonstrating early success in meeting their goals. "Why are we having this meeting when it could be spread out, it could be extended, because [youth] are doing everything and all the goals are set and they're meeting them all and there's no point to meet weekly." To remedy this particular tension, probation officers suggested that meeting frequency should be set in accordance with the youth's placement in the *cycle of change*: "it should go with the cycle of change, where they are in the cycle of change, because weekly [meetings] is totally extreme for me, it really was." Probation officers expressed that the structure of OBP should be further developed to better account for youth and families' individualized needs. One respondent suggested relaxing expectations somewhat to relieve these pressures and facilitate ease in implementation: "we've got to give ourselves permission of, you know, let's just meet up for lunch, great job...that's actually doing something." Altogether, probation officers valued the increased structure but needed more guidance on how to build in adaptation and flexibility.

*Perceived Family Benefits*

Overall, probation officers reported the OBP model provided better structure for engaging with families than traditional probation ( $n = 19$ ). In particular, probation officers credited structured parental involvement as key to its effective family engagement: "the structure of [OBP] empowers the parents." The OBP model integrates parents' goals for their youth into a youths' structured goal setting, thus providing probation officers with a framework to "acknowledge [parent goals] and work with [parent goals] and historically it's been, like, that's a parenting issue not a probation issue, well now it's a probation issue...but it's a probation issue that parents have control a lot of." Integrating these parent goals into youths' structured goal setting subsequently creates tangible markers for youth and family

**TABLE 3.**  
**OBP Probation Focus Group Themes and Illustrative Quotations**

Themes	Mentions (n)	Description	Quotation
Benefits of setting achievable goals	21	OBP supports the development of small, short-term, tangible goals that are within the youth's capacity to meet.	"[OBP] breaks down behaviors to where they're a lot more tangible for the youth and family to really specifically target [them]."
Balance structure with flexibility	29	The positive benefits of the OBP model's structure must be met with clearer instructions regarding model adherence and use of discretion.	—
Increased intentionality	16	The structure of OBP's model requires POs to be more intentional when meeting with families, which facilitates increased confidence in PO effectiveness.	"More intentional on meeting with parents and caregivers." "I always walk out [of a meeting] with an outcome as well, where before I could walk out and be... what did I accomplish today?"
Concerns regarding model flexibility	13	More explicit instruction should be provided regarding balancing model adherence with individualized family needs.	"I meet with them more frequently when they're in, you know, [their] pre-contemplative, contemplative [stage]."
Perceived family benefits	19	POs observe that youth and families engage positively with the OBP model.	"[W]e kind of empower [parents] and make them feel like they have a say..." "[W]e are addressing what the parents see as the need and what they want."
Reduction of family crises	9	The OBP model provides specific tools (structured goal setting) to address escalating processes of the family dynamic, resulting in an overall reduction of family crises.	"I think OBP sets it up [for families] to have less crises." "[Families] are not getting into these fights that... can lead to Assault 4s."
Time and emotional resources	12	POs require additional support in meeting the demands of the OBP model.	"[W] have pressure that we put on ourselves, like, I have to have a meeting I have to have a goal..."

progress, resulting in a clear feedback system, “I know exactly what we talked about...the goals...[the] action steps...so I always walk out [of meetings] with an outcome as well, where before, I could walk out and be, what did I, what did I just accomplish today?” In effect, the impact of OBP’s structured engagement of families is “it helps with the rapport building with parents, as well as empowering them to take control back in their own lives and households.”

A specific benefit of OBP’s structured family engagement and goal setting, referenced by probation officers, was that it reduced family crises ( $n = 9$ ). “I think OBP sets it up to have less crises.” Probation officers found that parents would set youth and family goals around noncriminal behaviors that would historically escalate into altercations requiring police response: “it is a common theme though, like, most of the time [parents] want goals to be around, like, chores...very appropriate parent stuff.” One particular example was of a parent goal for the youth to do his or her laundry a set number of times per week. The probation officer recounted that “[the mom] was like, ‘just to come home and see that I don’t have as much laundry to do...we are not getting into these fights that can lead to Assault 4s.’” Often, probation officers were able to use these goals as reference points for youth progress. One probation officer recalled a parent meeting where the family-set goal was for the youth to do the dishes regularly without being asked. “I was talking to the mom and she was really upset because [her youth] wasn’t following curfew...and I would [ask], ‘but how has he been doing with the dishwasher?’ And she goes, ‘actually...that hasn’t been a problem at all.’” Probation officers discussed how, prior to implementing OBP, they would frequently receive distressing phone calls from parents who wanted probation officers to respond to their youth’s noncriminal behaviors. After implementing OBP, however, “[we] don’t have those phone calls with parents as often, and if [we] do, they’re more guided and [we] can redirect and focus on...what we said we are working on.”

#### *Time and Emotional Resources*

Probation officers also noted ( $n = 12$ ) the increased amount of time required to adhere to OBP’s structured engagement: “it’s not just physically a lot more time, it’s kind of mentally a lot more time.” In particular, the amount of preparation required to effectively conduct a youth or family meeting was noted:

“the meetings are so intentional, they require kind of prep work before...it takes a lot more thought than just to go sit at someone’s school and say, ‘hey, how’s it going?’” Elements of the OBP model, like meeting with youth on a weekly basis, placed an additional demand on probation officers that they felt was not always realistic, “meeting weekly has been a challenge, I don’t know if I have been actually able to meet with any youth weekly face-to-face.” Further, probation officers reported feeling internalized pressure to ensure that youth and parent meetings were particularly goal oriented: “we were just putting a lot of really high expectations that we had to have these really... amazing goals and action steps and so, when it wasn’t happening, then it’s like...where do we go?” This led to probation officers overloading meetings with goal-oriented content: “I think I have in every single case overshot my goal for the first meeting.”

Overall, probation officers reflected an appreciation for the structured focus on goals and family engagement while expressing the need for more flexibility and guidance for adaptation.

#### **Youth and Parent Interviews**

Two youth and two parent interviews were conducted to provide a user perspective on OBP implementation. These interviews were subjected to the same content analysis methodology as the probation focus group. The youth and parent interviews were analyzed separately and then combined for themes. Two themes emerged from this analysis: (1) satisfaction with probation and progress and (2) need for more responsive rewards.

#### *Satisfaction with Probation and Progress*

Both parents and youth reported satisfaction with the probation process. One youth recalled that the probation officer “[was] asking me all these ideas and what we want for opportunity based...and they were asking me what I thought would be good on probation. And I liked that.” Additionally, probation officers were characterized as attentive and responsive to the family’s needs, with one parent reporting that “[our probation officer] was pretty good at getting back to me whenever I needed her. So she was very good at that.” Both parents and youth noted improvements in their relationships with one another. One youth reported that “[my parents], they’re more happy and calm and not so angry and frustrated [with me].” Both youth and parents noted improvements in consequential

thinking skills, with one youth commenting “[my probation officer] said, you know, if you do stuff like you did before you’ll end up in the same place. And I’m like, okay, well I’ll not do that again, or I’ll try not to at least. And that was pretty good.”

#### *Need for More Responsive Rewards*

The youth and parent respondents noted weaknesses with the way rewards were structured in the pilot program. One youth reported that they didn’t always feel the incentives were relevant with their interests, which impacted their engagement with the model: “I don’t think [the incentives] really helped, because, like, I mean those goals kind of helped, but not the whole point system. To me there was kind of no point.” However, youth found that the reward of a reduced probation sentence for completing OBP requirements was a salient incentive: “I liked that I got my felony off and I’m doing better now.” Concerning larger programmatic incentives, parents and youth both commented that community opportunities were not always physically accessible for families, which likewise negatively impacted youth engagement with the model. One parent reported, “[The community opportunities] didn’t work for us mostly because of timing and distance.” One of the parents also shared that OBP should not reduce sentencing elements like community service, which the parent viewed as an important method of accountability. One parent expressed “it would have been kind of cool for that community service piece not to be accomplished some other way [e.g., by attending counseling services].”

#### *Refinement of the Model*

The research team brought the themes back to the probation workgroup for a discussion which led to a decision to restructure weekly rewards and positive youth development activities. In the prototype model, youth received weekly points but only received material rewards after deciding to “cash” in points. The probation officers found that the youth were reluctant to cash in points, as this reduced the visible total of points available to them. Consequently, most youth were not receiving a schedule of material rewards consistent with other models of contingency management. To maintain the accumulating balance of points and have the youth receive material rewards more frequently, the team implemented a new structure for giving youth small items (e.g., chips, candy) at each in-person meeting

during which the youth earned at least one point. Total points continued to accumulate towards social rewards, including a lunch “date” with the probation officer and early time off from probation. The “reward” of a community opportunity was also restructured. In the prototype model, this opportunity had to be earned after accumulating sufficient points. However, implementation was challenged by mismatches in timing between when a youth earned sufficient points and the availability of an opportunity. The team also found that some youth were not earning community opportunities because of violations of probation or not earning early off from probation and felt that youth could have benefitted from some of the positive youth development programs available through community partners. Consequently, the community opportunities were restructured to be a required part of the probation plan but without ties to the specific point totals or timing.

The team also instituted a weekly staffing of OBP cases so that officers could discuss challenging situations and receive feedback from the entire group. As noted in the findings, the OBP model required more officer skills and judgment in determining how to handle resistant or rule-breaking behavior. The officers varied quite a bit in how comfortable they were in providing direct therapeutic guidance to the youth or parents, and the team determined that having a case staffing model would help support officers who were less comfortable in this role.

## Discussion

Probation officers largely found an alternative, developmentally grounded model of probation feasible to implement. Most of the officers were able to implement more structured and frequent goal setting, apply points, and work in close collaboration with families. The primary concerns about this approach related to the time needed to focus on these new elements and uncertainty about how one could be within the constraints of the new guidelines for practice. The officers noted that structured goal setting and family engagement were particularly helpful. The findings also revealed that shifting typical probation supervision towards a developmental model will require a shift of time and emotional resources that may be challenging for probation departments to absorb. The focus group revealed that, in shifting to a new model, probation officers were not always sure what constituted sufficiently adherent practice and how to make informed

adaptations to meet the needs of families. Feedback from parents and youth indicated high satisfaction with the program and with youth and family improvement within the probation period. The interviews also revealed some strain with the schedule of rewards and positive youth activities. Findings from this initial pilot were subsequently incorporated into a refined model that is undergoing another round of evaluation.

This study offers some useful insights into the resources that will be required to shift juvenile probation practice. Consistent with previous studies (Schwalbe, 2012), our small study also found that even in a progressively oriented probation department, typical supervision was still largely governed by an assessment, referral, and monitoring framework, with relatively less attention on the relationship and skills-transfer opportunities between the probation officer and family. Structuring probation similarly to therapeutic case management or even brief psychotherapy was a new role that probation officers accepted with different levels of enthusiasm. As revealed in the focus group, some officers felt that this was the way probation should already be operating, while others experienced some confusion about what constituted adherent practice. Of five probation officers involved in the pilot, one ended up dropping out due to struggles with reconciling the perceived obligations of probation supervision (e.g., violating youth for noncompliant behaviors) and incorporating a youth development approach. This suggests that probation departments should expect some level of strain if they attempt to implement standard expectations for this type of practice, with some officers enthusiastically embracing an approach more consistent with their preferred practice and other officers struggling to accept core assumptions of the model or feeling confident in implementation.

Our findings also speak to the importance of organizational factors involved in system reform. The site of the pilot was a court with leaders in management positions who were already operating with a change management orientation and tolerance for innovation. The strategy for beginning with a pilot with a subgroup of probation officers, in addition to fine tuning the model, was to build awareness and positive outcomes prior to instituting a system-wide expectation. The involved officers were then able to speak to their peers about the benefits of the model, and when the probation department asked for more volunteers

to engage in a larger rollout strategy (ongoing now), all but three officers volunteered. The co-design strategy is intended to engage this type of on-site buy-in, which appeared to work successfully with the model now running independently of any external support or consultation. At the same time, because the development and pilot occurred in a supportive organizational climate, the implementation process may look different in sites where there is little leadership buy in.

## Limitations

The study findings are limited by the small sample and one court site. Further, the probation officers involved in providing feasibility information about the model were a mix of probation officers who had been involved in the early development work as well as newer officers who were only engaged in the pilot. Consequently, some officers had already invested a significant amount of time in developing a model they felt would work well with court operations and their own probation approach. At the same time, the officers were also motivated to develop a model that would be applicable to the larger probation population, and we believe the feedback offered was relevant to the larger probation officer pool in this particular site. The study findings should be viewed as providing information about the feasibility of instituting reform for juvenile probation and not as generalizable findings about the specific OBP model.

## Conclusion

It appears likely that calls to integrate adolescent developmental science into juvenile justice practice will have a sustained and impactful influence. However, little is known about the effort such a shift will require at multiple layers of justice policy and practice. Our study sheds light on the feasibility of integrating these principles in one probation department, with both promising and cautionary findings. Probation officers found changes in goal setting, family engagement, and youth rewards helpful while also expressing a need for more guidance on how to tailor the model to individual youth. The pilot test was also helpful in uncovering ways in which rewards were not working. These findings were integrated into a new model that is currently operating in the same court, two years after beginning the development process. Overall, this study finds that fairly significant shifts in probation practice to align with a developmental approach are achievable, but

success in replication will heavily depend on the readiness of sites for organizational change.

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