

Evaluation of a diversion programme for youth sexual offenders: Fight with Insight



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Executive Summary

Introduction

The abuse of children is a concerning issue in South Africa. Interventions with the perpetrators of this abuse, especially young offenders, are vital in order to break the cycle of abuse. Conventional methods to treat young offenders within the justice system, such as punitive correctional facilities, have not been proven to be effective in the reduction of recidivism rates amongst these youth. In contrast to these conventional methods, psychosocial and cognitive-behavioural therapies have been recommended in the treatment of youth offenders,¹ and a combination of these treatments is often used in diversion programmes for the rehabilitation of youth offenders.²

Apart from these therapeutic methods, various alternative activities have been incorporated into the rehabilitation of youth offenders, such as sport.³ Sandford et al⁴ maintain that sport (and physical activity) can play a role in the promotion of pro-social behaviour. This is relevant for youth offenders, but a clear understanding of how and with whom this will happen has not been attained, and claims regarding the benefits of such programmes rely on a number of conditions.⁴ Regarding research in this area, they recommend a focus on the “optimal combinations of individuals, activities and contexts” in sport and physical activity programmes.⁴

Fight with Insight

The Teddy Bear Clinic for Abused Children (TBC) is a non-profit organisation based in Johannesburg that works to protect and rehabilitate abused children. Fight with Insight (FWI) is a boxing project facilitated at the TBC’s offices in the southern suburbs of Johannesburg, and is intended for children and youth who have committed a sexual offence, as part of a 12-week diversion programme, SPARC (Support Programme for Abuse Reactive Children). Diversion can be defined as the channelling of children and youth away from the formal court system into programmes that make them accountable for their actions and give them an opportunity to repair the damage caused by their crime, within themselves.

FWI has two complementary components that run back-to-back. Within the same day, participants attend a boxing session and then move on to a Cognitive-Behavioural Group Therapy (CBT) session, combining the physical and interpersonal disciplines. Those who complete the full 12 weeks are then able to join the Box Office Boxing Gym programme (in Johannesburg’s southern suburbs), which also forms part of FWI. Support groups are also offered at the TBC for parents of FWI participants.

The content of the therapy sessions (for youth) include the following, and these themes are also integrated into the boxing sessions:

- Acknowledgement of responsibility for one’s actions;
- Awareness that actions have consequences;
- Understanding sex and sexuality, including HIV/ AIDS;
- Develop victim empathy;
- Affirmation exercises;
- Anger management;
- Problem solving skills;
- Steps to healthy touching, appropriate an inappropriate touching;
- Developing clear boundaries; and
- Impulse control.

Research aim

The aim of this study was to qualitatively evaluate the effectiveness of the FWI programme. The objectives of the study were to:

- Define programme effectiveness within the context of the FWI programme;
- Describe the programme and mechanisms of its effectiveness;
- Evaluate perceptions of the programme's effectiveness, according to participants, programme managers and programme facilitators; and
- Describe factors influencing the effectiveness of the programme.

Methods

Because FWI has approximately 12 participants per 12-week programme, which is a relatively small number in comparison with other sport for development programmes, a qualitative approach was deemed to be most appropriate for the evaluation. Three focus groups were conducted with FWI participants (n=17), two with parents of FWI participants (n=7), and two with youth offenders who had only participated in CBT sessions, and did not take part in any alternative therapies, such as boxing (comparison group, n=10). Participants (FWI and comparison group) were between the ages of 11 and 19 years, and had completed the FWI or CBT programme between 2008 and 2011. Key informant interviews were conducted with FWI programme staff involved in the management (n=3) and facilitation (n=3) of the programme. Focus group facilitators were familiar with the FWI programme, and were fluent in Zulu and Sotho (the African languages commonly spoken in Johannesburg).

Summary of findings

The findings of this study began with a definition of effectiveness within the context of the FWI programme. Central to this definition is the reduction of recidivism amongst participants, and this is supported by a number of intra- and interpersonal indicators of effectiveness. The description of the programme, which expands on the brief outline given in the introduction, explains how the CBT and boxing components of the programme work together to bring about change in participants.

Participants' perceptions paint a generally positive picture about the programme and its effectiveness. While these alone may not be seen as conclusive due to their subjective nature, positive perceptions can play a role in the facilitation of the mechanisms of programme effectiveness. Furthermore, key informants and parents' perceptions reinforce these positive perceptions, and the parental perspective gives insight into families' experiences and highlights the importance of involving and supporting family members in the programme.

Worth noting are the differences between FWI and comparison group participants' perceptions of the change and learning they experienced as a result of their respective programmes. FWI participants had more to say on this topic, and tended to be more specific about changes and learning, many of which related to changes in behaviour, improved understanding and greater insight, such as being aware of consequences and taking responsibility. This may be due to heightened self-awareness, which could be influenced by increased self-confidence from the boxing sessions, or it could be due to the fact that themes from the CBT are strongly reinforced in the boxing sessions, especially through the four principles. Bullying was a pertinent issue for both FWI and comparison group participants, and while this was evidently dealt with in both the FWI and CBT programmes, it is possible that fighting was addressed more explicitly in FWI where a clear distinction was made between boxing and

“fighting on the streets.” It is possible that because of this, FWI participants may feel better equipped with the skills to manage anger and channel their aggression.

The mechanisms of programme effectiveness and the factors influencing this effectiveness can be summed up in Figure 1 below. This conceptual model could exemplify an “optimal combination of individuals, activities and contexts,” as proposed by Sandford et al,⁴ and presents a range of conditions referred to by these authors. This conceptual model helps to highlight that it is not boxing on its own that can bring about change, although this has never been claimed by the programme, but rather that the interplay between the physical nature of the boxing, the four principles that are emphasised by the boxing coach, and the themes addressed within the CBT. These combined help to develop the skills required by participants to bring about sustainable and meaningful change in their lives, particularly as they learn to apply these skills outside the context of the diversion programme and their offending behaviour.

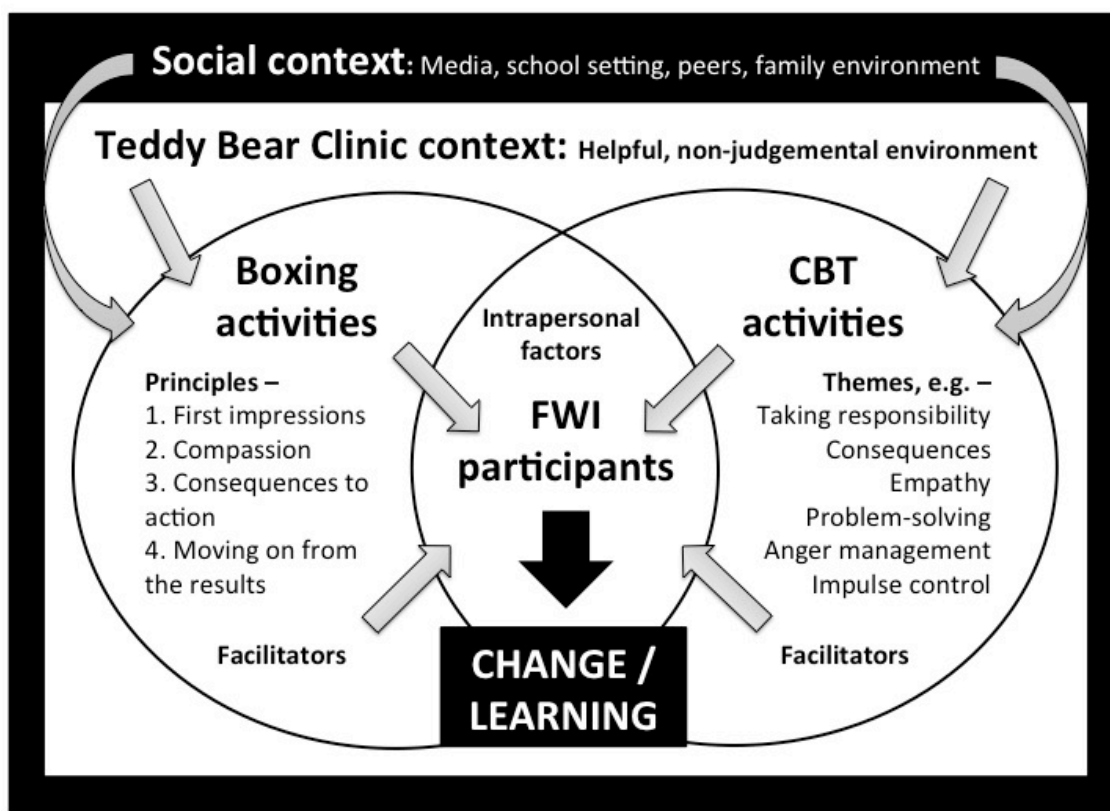


Figure 1: Mechanisms of programme effectiveness

In light of participants and key informants’ comments, the role of the main boxing coach deserves additional attention. This individual teaches FWI participants boxing skills; imparts life skills and instills values through the four principles; helps to empower participants and build their self-confidence; and enforces discipline and boundaries. Through this, he commands the respect of these youth and is somewhat of a paternal role model for them, particularly as he demonstrates to them that they can be men without being violent towards others. It is quite likely that many FWI participants may be lacking a father figure, and that this paternal absence may have contributed to the offending behaviour that brought them to the diversion programme. Therefore, it is possible that a strong male

role model who demonstrates paternal characteristics could meet a need within FWI participants, and could be a powerful catalyst for long-term personal development within these individuals.

Recommendations

No major changes were recommended for the programme in the interviews and focus groups. The main recommendation from this study would be the expansion of the programme, and it is hoped that these study findings help to strengthen the case for this. Key to this expansion would be ensuring that the combination of CBT and boxing is maintained, and that there remains the “optimal combination of individuals, activities and contexts,”⁴ which would include the valuable context of the TBC. This study has helped to identify what could be seen as the key conditions for the success of the programme’s expansion, and these would be: a helpful, non-judgemental environment for the programme; boxing sessions that incorporate the four principles mentioned earlier; CBT that addresses the relevant themes; and facilitators who encourage personal growth and serve as role models for participants.

Conclusion

FWI is a unique programme that combines sporting activity with therapeutic processes, with the intention of rehabilitating youth sex offenders. While long-term follow up would be able to assess the true impact of this programme on recidivism and holistic change within these individuals, this study has provided significant insight into the programme, how it works and the kind of change and learning that it helps to bring about in its participants. Furthermore, the findings of this study contribute to an understanding of the factors that can both hinder and promote the success of this programme. Those factors promoting success should continue to be upheld in the current programme, and constitute an essential foundation for any further expansion of the programme.

References

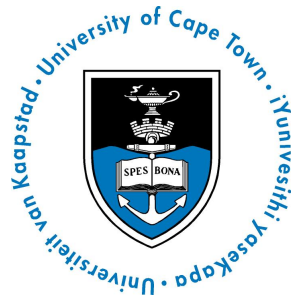
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In partnership with the **Teddy Bear Clinic for Abused Children**



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