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Closed institutions, open institutions and family preservation services working together hand in hand helping juvenile delinquents and their families

Outplacement in closed institutions is not a very effective intervention in terms of preventing antisocial behaviour. Homebased treatment programs have been developed, aiming to prevent unnecessary placements. Although, in Belgium and probably also in other countries, there is growth of the number of placements in closed institutions. The availability of family preservation programs has not been the solution everybody hoped for. This raises questions about the used treatments: should young delinquents be treated as adults with the focus on punishment and/or restorative justice? Or should they be seen as troubled children who need care, where any rupture of family ties must be prevented? The key answer is that different treatment models can work together and that there is no need to polarise among each other. We plead for a model that combines different interventions. You can see the model as a gearbox of a car: different parts work together, sometimes even simultaneous turning in different directions, sometimes active, sometimes non-active, with the possibility to shift gears and make other combinations. In Belgium, several foster care organisation have made contracts with closed institutions to work together. The overarching goal is to let the youngsters live in their own environment. These organisations have in common that in the treatment program, the youngster can shift between living in the family or in the institution without the need of a new decision of the judge. The interventions focus on different levels: individual client, his family, but also his environment: peers, school/work, neighbourhood. There is explicit attention for reconnecting (versus “de-linquere”), not only with relatives en friends, but also with developmental tasks like going back to school and working. For those who do not succeed in traditional school, alternative programs are available so they can learn to cope with a normalised rhythm and see results of daily efforts. Examples: working on a farm, alternative “school drop-out” programs. Responsible behaviour from the youngster and from meaningful adults is encouraged. Periods of residential care are used for strengthening social skills. All involved organisations deliver intensive home-based treatment. Using this model the period of detention can be shortened. If necessary, a short re-placement is possible. The duration of the combined treatment is limited to six months, although well-motivated exceptions are allowed.