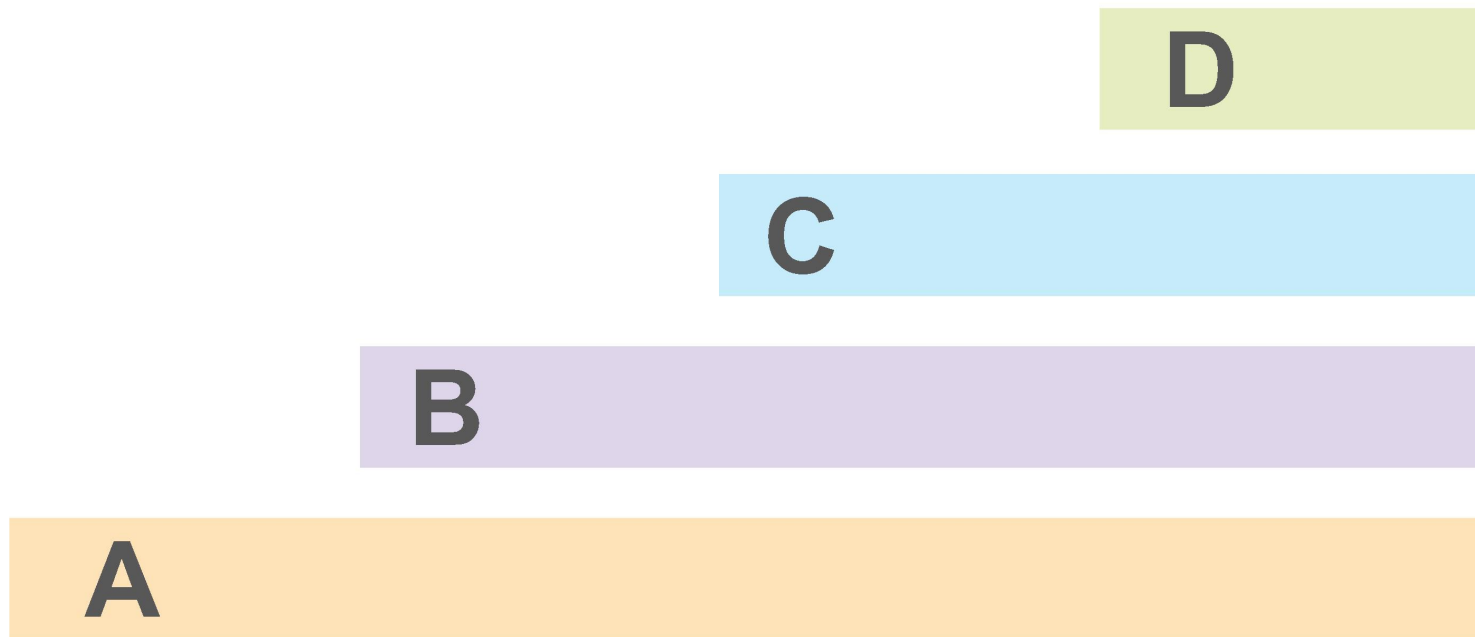


A guide to Child First



What is Child First?

- **A Child First approach means putting children at the heart of what we do.** The youth justice system should treat children as children, see the whole child, including any structural barriers they face and focus on better outcomes for children. This will also create safer communities with fewer victims.
- The youth justice system has been hugely successful at reducing the number of children entering the system and children within the secure estate. However, **those children who remain in the system face multiple, complex challenges and need support to remove barriers and create opportunities** for them, to move forward with their lives.
- The evidence tells us that a Child First approach is effective in addressing the offending behaviour of the small number of children within the youth justice system today, and in preventing offending by those children who are more likely to enter the system.
- **Child First is not a new approach** – it summarises contemporary understanding of what works in youth justice, built on decades of evidence.
- **Child First is the guiding principle for the youth justice sector**, and underpins the Standards for Children in the Justice System and revised Case Management Guidance.
- **Child First goes beyond the youth justice system.** The guiding principle is one that should steer intervention with all children, to recognise the potential they each bring.
- A Child First approach is more important than ever in the current climate. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to greater challenges for children including mental health, changes to education and an increase in harms caused by exploitation and abuse.

The guiding principle for the youth justice system

Child First means that all youth justice services...

As children

Prioritise the best interests of children and recognising their particular needs, capacities, rights and potential. All work is child-focused, developmentally informed, acknowledges structural barriers and meets responsibilities towards children.

Building pro-social identity

Promote children's individual strengths and capacities to develop their pro-social identity for sustainable desistance, leading to safer communities and fewer victims. All work is constructive and future-focused, built on supportive relationships that empower children to fulfil their potential and make positive contributions to society.

Collaborating with children

Encourage children's active participation, engagement and wider social inclusion. All work is a meaningful collaboration with children and their carers.

Diverting from stigma

Promote a childhood removed from the justice system, using pre-emptive prevention, diversion and minimal intervention. All work minimises criminogenic stigma from contact with the system.

As children

Prioritise the best interests of children and recognising their particular needs, capacities, rights and potential. All work is child-focused, developmentally informed, acknowledges structural barriers and meets adults' responsibilities towards children.

- Children are different to adults – they have different needs and vulnerabilities, shouldn't be treated in the same way, and facilitating their positive development is the responsibility of adults.
- Child First recognises children according to their age, development and their intrinsic value and potential. The youth justice system has previously focused on managing a child's offending behaviour and the risks they were considered to pose. However, evidence now tells us to prevent offending, we must address children's unmet needs and identifying their strengths and creating opportunities to realise their potential.

Building pro-social identity

Promote children's individual strengths and capacities to develop their pro-social identity for sustainable desistance, leading to safer communities and fewer victims. All work is constructive and future-focused, built on supportive relationships that empower children to fulfil their potential and make positive contributions to society.

- Evidence tells us that the way to prevent offending and have safer communities with fewer victims is by promoting pro-social identity and positive child outcomes. Rather than just managing 'risk of offending', which keeps children labelled as potential offenders, work focuses on achieving positive child outcomes – as for any child in society.
- Developing pro-social identity means helping children to see themselves in ways that encourage positive behaviour and a constructive future. This is critical for crime-free lives. Activities should be future-focused to help move lives forward rather than underlining an offender identity.
- Positive relationships between children and others are crucial to reaffirming their individual strengths and teaching them that they belong. Diversity is important to identity and its development.
- Addressing 'risks of harm' to the child or others is crucial to provide the safe space for child development and for victims and potential victims, but stigma can be reduced if this understood in more positive terms like keeping everybody safe, safeguarding, or health and safety.

Collaborating with children

Encourage children's active participation, engagement and wider social inclusion. All work is a meaningful collaboration with children and their carers.

- Engaging children is vital. There is a difference between participation, where children might simply receive information and engagement, where children feel as though they part of the process.
- The youth justice process shouldn't simply 'happen' to them – they should have a voice, feel invested in it, be part of the solution and believe that justice has taken place. The evidence tells us children are more likely to stay with the process if they are both genuinely part of it and feel as though they are part of it.
- Children should feel as though engaging with the process is relevant to their needs, their interests and their future and brings real benefit for them.

Diverting from stigma

Promote a childhood removed from the justice system, using pre-emptive prevention, diversion and minimal intervention. All work minimises criminogenic stigma from contact with the system.

- **Prevention** is support and intervention with children (and their parents/carers) who may be displaying behaviours which may indicate underlying needs or vulnerability. In practice this involves a tiered approach of early and targeted prevention. **Diversion** is where children with a linked offence receive an alternative outcome that does not result in a criminal record and avoids escalation into the formal youth justice system. Full definitions for both terms can be found on the [YJ Resource Hub](#).
- The evidence tells us there are many benefits to diverting children away from the formal criminal justice system including minimising stigma. Diversion contributes to better outcomes for children and consequently reduced crime and safer communities.
- We know that children will make mistakes purely because of lack of experience and knowledge that adults accumulate, as well as biological and cognitive development. Diverting children recognises this and removes the stigma of involvement with the justice system.
- The evidence also tells us that contact with the youth justice system can increase the likelihood of children reoffending - the system itself becoming a barrier to children moving forwards in their lives away from offending. We need to avoid children developing an identity that will support criminal or anti-social behaviours and lead to negative outcomes and unsafe communities.

Key Evidence

An overview of the influential research papers and policy developments underpinning Child First can be found in [Child First Justice: The research evidence-base](#) (Case and Browning, 2021)

As Children:

- [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989](#) - Specifies that formal youth justice responses should be 'a measure of last resort' (United Nations 1989: Article 37b)
- [Punishing Disadvantage - a profile of children in custody](#) (among others) - Demonstrates that children are innately more vulnerable than adults.
- [Maturity, young adults and criminal justice: A literature review](#) - Indicates that children differ from adults intellectually, emotionally and socially.
- [Youth on Trial - A Developmental Perspective on Juvenile Justice](#) - Suggests that the stress of YJS involvement impairs children's decision-making.
- [Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime](#) - Identified through longitudinal research that formal system contact is harmful, stigmatising, criminogenic and potentially the most influential risk factor for reoffending (McAra and McVie, 2005; 2007a,b; 2010; 2012)

Building Pro-social Identity:

- [Beyond Youth Custody](#) (BYC) - Provides a robust evidence-base and model for effective resettlement of children leaving custody based on five evidence-based principles facilitating Child First practice: Constructive, Co-created, Customised, Consistent, Co-ordinated (Hazel et al 2020)

Key Evidence

Collaborating with children:

- Positive Promotion Project - Provides evidence that interpretations of participation differ between children and adults (Charles, 2017) and demonstrates that rights-based interventions improve child/adult relationships, positive outcomes, prevention of negative outcomes, improved service effectiveness (Haines and Case, 2015)
- [Positive Youth Justice: Children first, offender second](#) - Emphasises the engagement, participation and inclusion of children as central practice principles enabling their voices to be heard, on the basis that 'children are part of the solution, not part of the problem' (Haines and Case, 2015: 287)
- [Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship](#) - Defines eight degrees of participation based on UNICEF research and illustrates them as a 'Ladder of Participation'. 'Full participation' is defined as the equitable sharing of decision-making with adults, and as a fundamental principle in the improvement of children's rights (Hart, 1992; 2008: 5)
- [Participatory Research: Working with vulnerable groups in research and practice](#) - Provides a participatory model against which researchers and practitioners can locate their own work. In the youth justice context, where Child First principles to promote participation within the 'child as actor' domain, the model can be adapted for practice utility (Aldridge, 2016)
- [Engaging young people as partners for change: The UR community project](#) - Identifies that children have a clear understanding of their position as 'actors' rather than as passive participants, thus demonstrating an awareness of their right to express a view and have that view heard in all matters that concern them. (Charles and Haines, 2019)
- [Greater Manchester Youth Justice University Partnership](#) - Evidences a participatory approach that upholds children's rights and enables them to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes (Smithson, et al., 2020)
- [Hearing new voices](#) - Argues that 'the relationship between young people and practitioners is the centre-piece of youth justice provision' and provides recommendations to 'rethink' youth justice (Drake et al., 2014: 22)

Diverting from Stigma:

- [Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime](#) - Identifies that formal system contact is potentially the most influential risk factor for reoffending, thus supporting minimal intervention (McAra and McVie, 2005; 2007a, b; 2010; 2012)