

Hip-hop Diversion Program Proposal

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Abstract

The Greene County Juvenile Office should implement a hip-hop-based expressive arts diversion program to address gaps in youth engagement. The current diversion model relies on voluntary participation and often struggles to maintain participant interest necessary for long-term behavioral change. This proposal introduces a trauma-informed healing model that utilizes the cultural relevance of hip-hop to identify personal strengths, promote resiliency, and foster healthy coping skills. The program covers a 12-week, three-part curriculum: media literacy to build critical thinking, creative writing for emotional processing, and a community showcase to strengthen social bonds. Expressive arts are low barrier as they do not require any skills or prior experience to participate. This method identifies personal strengths and promotes self-regulation by shifting focus from the final artistic product to the therapeutic process. Adopting this program will provide the Juvenile Office with a high-engagement tool proven to reduce recidivism, benefiting both at-risk youth and the community.

Introduction

The state of Missouri is recognized nationally for its rehabilitative treatment model in the juvenile justice program. Missouri's juvenile justice programs focus on reducing recidivism by providing trauma informed care, personal development, and a focus on meaningful community involvement. Greene County offers several community resources focused on prevention, including the youth diversion program. The Greene County youth diversion program offers support to families facing challenging behavior with their youth by providing prevention resources. The diversion program offers community resources, family support, and a goal-oriented approach to assist youth before they enter the juvenile justice system. Nearly 60% of youth that are referred to the Juvenile Office avoid a formal record by being directed to the diversion program (Denney and Prince 5).

Missouri's Juvenile Justice system is widely considered a success, "70% of youth discharged remained law-abiding after three years" (Missouri Division of Youth Services). However, the diversion program still faces challenges. Perhaps the biggest challenge being that the program is voluntary. Youth participating in the diversion program are not legally obligated to complete the program. To keep youth engaged the program must use a strengths-based framework to address the current needs of youth. The program focuses on closing gaps in resources; however, we cannot always address every risk factor. For a diversion program to be meaningful it needs to address both risk and protective factors. The more protective factors a youth has the less likely they are to participate in high-risk behaviors (Search Institute).

The following proposal outlines the benefits of utilizing an expressive arts healing model in a youth diversion program. Expressive arts refer to the process of creating art for the enjoyment of the process rather than the final product. Expressive arts therapies are proven trauma-informed models of healing. Creating a hip-hop themed expressive arts program is a way to introduce youth to a variety of developmental assets including positive values, pro-social skills, and empowerment (Search Institute). Hip-hop has historically been used to process difficult emotions, give a voice to marginalized groups, and create social change. Similar programs have been successful in other counties throughout Missouri.

The Program

The proposed program consists of three parts: media literacy, creative writing, and a community showcase. The formatting of the program uses a developmental assets framework designed to support key developmental assets such as positive identity, social competencies, and constructive use of time. Constructive use of time for at least three hours per week is a developmental asset (Search Institute). This hip-hop diversion program consists of a 90-minute session twice a week, for 9 weeks. The curriculum is outlined below.

Media Literacy

Participants develop critical thinking skills by analyzing hip-hop media, identifying harmful narratives, and recognizing messages of resilience and strength.

Week 1: Identifying stereotypes and commercialization

Week 2: Identifying risk and protective factors in lyrics

Week 3: Identifying values and resiliency statements in lyrics

Media literacy is a critical skill for supporting long-term behavioral change. Knowledge is widely recognized as the fifth element of hip-hop, emphasizing critical thinking. For over 50 years, hip-hop has played a significant role in shaping culture and influencing youth identity.

Rap music is often portrayed in mainstream media as promoting crime and violence. While some artists may glorify these behaviors, many others use their platform to express lived experiences, highlight social injustice, and promote resilience. Researchers have identified recurring patterns in rap lyrics that reflect both risk and protective influences, particularly in how artists navigate injustice, identity, and authenticity (Nzinga and Medin).

Within this program, youth will engage in guided media analysis to explore these themes more deeply. Participants will examine how certain behaviors can develop as survival strategies in response to environmental stressors, while also identifying alternative, healthy coping skills. Additionally, youth will analyze how the commercialization of hip-hop has contributed to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes, particularly as the genre has grown in popularity and profitability.

Creative Writing

Participants engage in guided expressive writing to process emotions, explore identity, and develop healthy self-expression using hip-hop frameworks.

Week 4: Exploring emotions, personal experiences, and identity

Week 5: Reframing personal narrative through creative writing elements

Week 6: Hooks, repetition, and affirmations

Participants will build skills in emotional awareness, communication, and self-regulation while engaging in a process that does not require direct disclosure of traumatic events. Van der Kolk states, “healing requires integrating trauma as part of your story.” (Van der Kolk 181). Creative writing offers a low-barrier, culturally relevant method for organizing thoughts, processing emotions, and constructing personal narratives in a safe way. Youth are guided to reinterpret

their experiences by using resiliency statements and affirmations to move from a deficit mentality to a strengths-based perspective.

Participants will be introduced to creative writing techniques commonly used in hip-hop, including rhyme, metaphor, imagery, storytelling, and repetition. Through guided writing prompts, participants will apply these techniques to develop their identity, engage in self-reflection, and express themselves authentically.

Performance

Participants build confidence and communication skills while developing their voice through performance and community recognition.

Week 7: Tips for performance anxiety and improv

Week 8: Using your voice, body, and space in performance

Week 9: Practice and showcase

Hip-hop is inherently collaborative, making a community showcase an essential component of this program. Historically, hip-hop has served as a tool for collective healing, particularly in communities where access to traditional mental health care is limited. Researchers have examined alternative methods of processing trauma within these communities, such as drum circles and hip-hop cyphers. These practices create space for individuals to express emotions, share personal experiences, and receive validation from others.

Rap provides a platform for emotional expression and storytelling. Because hip-hop is collaborative, it also fosters connection and peer support, allowing participants to feel seen and heard within a group setting. This process mirrors key elements of group therapy, including shared experience, emotional validation, and community-based support (Levy et al., 103–110).

The performance component connects emotional processing to a somatic, or body-based, experience. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel Van der Kolk outlines several pathways to trauma recovery, including community engagement and expressive arts. He highlights how activities like community theater allow individuals to explore new roles and identities. For example, embodying a powerful character can help restore a sense of agency after experiences that create feelings of powerlessness (Van der Kolk 332-347).

Van der Kolk also emphasizes the importance of reconnecting with the body after trauma. Communal, rhythmic activities such as drumming, singing, and movement can help individuals reestablish awareness of their physical sensations. Group performance builds on this concept

by combining rhythm, movement, and expression in a shared environment. Performing alongside others can reduce anxiety, while mirroring and synchronized movement can promote a sense of grounding and connection (Van der Kolk 209-214).

The showcase may include spoken word, rap performances, or group pieces developed throughout the program. A community showcase provides youth with an opportunity to share their voice in a meaningful way. It reinforces confidence, strengthens communication skills, and allows participants to be recognized and supported by their community. This provides the developmental asset community values youth (Search Institute).

Logistics

Facility Requirements

The program will require a consistent meeting space that allows for group discussion, writing activities, and collaborative work. A classroom-style or multipurpose room with flexible seating is ideal. For performance sessions and the final showcase, access to a larger performance space such as an auditorium, gymnasium, or community room will be necessary to accommodate group presentations and audience seating.

Equipment and Materials

Basic audio equipment will be needed, including a speaker for music playback and a microphone for performance practice and the final showcase. Additional materials may include notebooks, pens, and printed lyric examples.

Staffing and Facilitation

The program should be facilitated by trained staff with experience in youth development, group facilitation, or expressive arts. Ideally, facilitators will have familiarity with hip-hop culture and trauma-informed practices to support engagement and emotional safety. Support staff may be needed during performance sessions to assist with setup, supervision, and technical needs.

Benefits

Trauma Informed Care

Expressive arts are low barrier and accessible as they do not require any technical skill. This is particularly beneficial for at-risk youth, as success is defined by participation rather than performance. A hip-hop-based program provides a safe, low-pressure environment where youth can explore identity and self-expression without long-term commitment, reducing resistance to engagement.

This approach aligns with trauma-informed care by emphasizing choice, autonomy, and emotional safety. Participants are not required to disclose personal experiences and are given control over how and when they share. This reduces the risk of re-traumatization while still allowing for meaningful emotional processing.

The program also supports key developmental assets, including positive identity, social competencies, and supportive relationships (Search Institute). Through creative expression and group collaboration, youth build communication skills, strengthen self-awareness, and develop a sense of belonging. Consistent group interaction fosters trust among peers and facilitators, creating a community of support that serves as a protective factor.

Conflict Resolution Skills

Positive conflict resolution is a developmental asset (Search Institute). Hip-hop has historically been used as a conflict resolution tool providing structured, non-violent outlets for emotional expression. Creative writing allows youth to pause and reflect on how they feel before reacting. Through practices such as lyric writing, cyphers, and rap battles, individuals can externalize frustration, process interpersonal conflict, and communicate experiences through a shared language rather than behavior. This also provides a community, as people bond over shared experiences and creative passions (Pim). This process supports emotional regulation by shifting responses from impulsive reactions to intentional expression.

Hip-hop provides members of different races, genders, and sexual identities a platform to discuss their experiences. This fosters unity among diverse groups of people (Wallace and Costello). Additionally, hip-hop encourages reflection and perspective-taking, as participants are guided to explore the context and meaning behind their experiences. This is an essential skill for building empathy. In group settings, shared expression fosters validation, peer support, and collective problem-solving, which are key components of effective conflict resolution. By replacing harmful coping strategies with creative expression, hip-hop-based interventions promote communication skills, self-awareness, and prosocial behavior. These conflict resolution skills and connection to a supportive community ought to reduce recidivism.

Conclusion

When we meet youth where they are at, they are more likely to engage, reflect, and grow. Unlike traditional diversion models that emphasize compliance, this approach prioritizes engagement, connection, and self-expression. These are key factors in sustaining meaningful change. Through a structured progression, participants build critical thinking skills, develop a stronger sense of identity, and gain confidence as they are seen and recognized by their community, preparing them to navigate future challenges more effectively. As participants strengthen social emotional skills, they become more grounded in their identity and decision-making, allowing them to influence their peers in positive ways. Over time, this creates a ripple effect, where healthier behaviors are reinforced within peer groups. Adopting this model would provide the Juvenile Office with a culturally relevant, trauma-informed tool that supports both individual growth and broader community well-being.

Works Cited

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