

Abstract

Tools4U is an individual training in cognitive and social skills, which is applied as a penal sanction of an educational nature for underage delinquents. The training focuses on reducing the lack of cognitive and social skills which are related to delinquent behavior, and also on strengthening protective factors that may safeguard youngsters from re-offending (Albrecht & Spanjaard, 2007).

In order to examine whether Tools4U is implemented as described in the program manuals, a process evaluation has been completed. Research questions concerned the prevalence of Tools4U training programs, experiences of adolescents and parents, execution, and recommendation to the court and selection of young offenders.

Prevalence

Unexpectedly, the total number of Tools4U training programs appeared to be relatively low in 2009. The training was applied 607 times in 2009. The predecessor of Tools4U, the social skills training (*SoVa*), was imposed around 3,000 times in 2008.

The relatively small number of Tools4U programs in 2009 may have been caused by some reluctance to advise Tools4U to the court. Case examiners (*raadsonderzoekers*) of the Council for Child Protection (*Raad voor de Kinderbescherming*) did not advise the training as often as they did in previous years with regard to its predecessor, the SoVa. The reason for this reluctance remains unclear.

The limited number of programs has several implications. For instance, Tools4U trainers cannot meet the requirements for certification, and the system of supervision and quality does not function properly on all accords.

In most cases, Tools4U is carried out according to plan. There are indications, however, that sometimes not showing up for training meetings is not systematically sanctioned and that, therefore, that actual number of successfully finished training programs is slightly smaller.

Adolescents and their parents

In order to be considered for Tools4U youngsters need to meet a number inclusion criteria. Due to a lack of relevant data it is not possible to conclude whether the right group of adolescents and parents was selected for Tools4U. Data concerning important inclusion criteria, such as intelligence, risk of recidivism and lack of skills were not available and standardized selection or assessment instruments were not used. Characteristics that were available have shown that the group of Tools4U participants, in 2009, was quite diverse. There is no reason to believe that many 'unfitting' youths were referred to Tools4U.

Parental involvement, a major difference of Tools4U compared to its predecessor, turned out to be limited in 2009. Apparently, it is not easy to accomplish since parents are not obliged to attend a training.

A true positive outcome was that the majority of adolescents and parents were positive about the training. Also, a large number of youths were motivated or could be motivated for Tools4U.

Execution

In practice, Tools4U did not meet all aspects of the guidelines stated in the program manual. In a number of trainings it appeared that some of the mandatory topics had not been taken forward. Furthermore, a national quality system mentioned in the Tools4U manual was not (yet) operational. This suggests only partial program integrity. But improvement seems certainly possible, for instance with regard to the system of supervision and the requirements that need to be met by trainers.

Recommendation and selection

With regard to the selection of juveniles and parents, and the advice to the court to impose Tools4U, several shortcomings have been identified. The choice for Tools4U is not always made according to instructions mentioned in the Tools4U manual. Neither was this choice made using the standardized assessment instruments as prescribed in the manual. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that Tools4U was the right choice in all cases, nor that the intended group of juveniles was assigned to Tools4U, or that youths and parents were referred to the most appropriate variety of Tools4U. This may affect the outcomes of Tools4U since an improper match between participants and training can result in unfavorable results.

General conclusion

In 2009, Tools4U was not optimally applied and carried out. Program integrity was only partially accomplished since Tools4U varied widely in many respects. Participants differed from each other as well as methods and tools used, and skills trained. Trainers differed in work experience and quality, and in the supervision they received. Program guidelines were sometimes only partially met.