

AVP Research Study 2002
Behavioral Impact of AVP

Findings from the Behavioral impact study of the AVP program at the Delaware Correctional Center in 2002 conducted by Stan Sloane.

This study took place at Delaware Correctional Center [DCC], which has not been predisposed to rehabilitation, and yet AVP has been functioning for 10 years in this 2200 inmate facility. The study looked at inmate write-ups before and after participation in AVP and used an experimental group and control group, the latter taken from the waiting list of more than 400. The sample size was 31 for the experimental group and 37 for the control group. Most subjects had long sentences of over 15 years and about 50% were lifers. All were sentenced for violent crimes and most had multiple offenses. Half of the experimental group had only the Basic workshop and the other half had advanced levels.

The results of the study were that the experimental group experienced a 60% drop in write-ups compared with the control group. AVP showed a greater impact on young [under 40] inmates and those with a GED or high school education. It was equally effective with all ethnic groups studied.

An explanation for why AVP appeared to be more effective with those under 40 is that those over 40 tend to have far fewer write-ups in the first place. Those over 40 in both the control and experimental groups had low write-ups and thus, showed only a small improvement from AVP.

There were also interviews with a sample of the experimental group. Analysis of their comments suggests:

- AVP develops respect for self and others [empathy].
- AVP develops critical social skills [communication, interpersonal trust]
- AVP helps participants develop alternative approaches to conflict resolution by providing examples, practice and positive reinforcement.
- Participants desire a better “community” within the institution [safer, more social environment with more meaningful interaction with fellow inmates and a desire to participate in socially oriented activities.]
- AVP establishes a reinforcing social system within the institution.

All of the interviewed men indicated they had grown up in environments where they were physically and/or sexually abused. Most said they did not understand any other way to react to conflict or confrontation except violently, because they never had an alternative model or example. That is, they started from a position of significant deficiency in social skills as compared to the general public. It is the first time most of them have been taught how to communicate and relate to others. For many, it is the first time they have talked to someone else about their thoughts or feelings on any intimate level.

It all starts by establishing a sense of dignity or self-worth in participants. This serves to instill a willingness and ability to communicate. Participants first have to see themselves as worthy of being communicated with, in order for them to initiate the process. As they begin communicating, they develop affective trust [Cognitive trust is believing that others are competent to carry out a particular task, whereas affective trust is believing others will support and help you as part of your friendship]. As trust builds, they begin to share feelings and learn

that others are more like them than they are different. This leads to the recognition that others are “OK.” As affective trust increases, participants begin to see others as having value, which is the foundation for empathy. The result is that pro-social behaviors begin to develop rather quickly. As their self-confidence and self-esteem develop, they are less effected by the negative influences on their tiers and in the institution in general. This is reinforced by the high level of visibility of this positive “community” in the institution and the fact that other graduates tend to perpetuate what they have learned from AVP. It also creates curiosity in new inmates who are apprehensive about prison life and are drawn to this community.

Of long term significance is the relationship of these changes on maturation. Two very important skills or abilities of adult maturity is being able to develop meaningful relationships and make healthy decisions. Prison, by its design, arrests the development of these two skills. AVP effectively reverses this process by:

- Fostering the development of empathy which is the result of an individual looking at and accepting him/herself [in-to-me-see] which allows her/him to be intimate with others, all of which is necessary for meaningful relationships with significant others.
- Empowering participants through interpersonal and intrapersonal skills development and attitude change. Inmates typically feel themselves to be victims, powerless and alienated. AVP helps them realize they are co-creators of their lives which, with positive attitude change, leads to responsible and healthy decision making.

Of interest here is the finding reported in the “Effectiveness of the Cognitive Skills Training Program: From Pilot to National Implementation,” published by the Correctional Services of Canada [1991], that a “cognitive skills program produced significant improvements in almost all psychometric measures in participants, measures that have been shown to be effective predictors of criminal behavior.” We don’t yet have research data on the impact of AVP post release, but all indications are that it is likely to be significant. [A recidivism study of AVP at DCC is currently underway.]

This study has shown that AVP significantly improves behavior [measured by write-ups] in inmates who were violent offenders serving long sentences. It was especially effective with those under 40 years of age with at least a GED or high school education. It also seems to improve empathy, critical social skills and a belief that they can improve their life and situation.

AVP and AVP type programs appear to be an important component in a total rehabilitation approach, which includes education, vocational training and drug treatment. Once an individual’s attitude and skill level have changed, almost anything is possible.

Copies of the full “Behavioral Impact Study of AVP” can be obtained by contacting Stan Sloane stanton.d.sloane@lmco.com or John A. Shuford jshuford@dol.net.