



# GRADUATED RESPONSE SYSTEMS

**G**raduated response systems provide empirically based strategies for responding effectively to youth behavior. Incremental, proportionate, and predictable responses are delivered so that positive behaviors are encouraged and reinforced and negative behaviors are discouraged and met with consequences that hold youth accountable. Graduated response systems in juvenile probation foster positive behavior change to facilitate successful completion of probation, an approach that helps youth become productive, law-abiding citizens and also prevents the unnecessary use of detention and residential placement.

## **GRADUATED RESPONSE SYSTEMS AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT**

Neurological changes that take place in the brain during adolescence indicate that youths' cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional functioning are still developing. The areas of the brain that govern impulse control, reasoning, problem solving, and emotion regulation continue to develop during adolescence. Other neurological characteristics of the teenage years render youth particularly sensitive to the anticipation and delivery of rewards and to valuing potential short-term, positive consequences of behaviors over long-term negative outcomes. Graduated response systems can help youth successfully complete probation by providing responses to behaviors that are grounded in research on adolescent development and decision making.

## **EMPIRICAL BASIS FOR GRADUATED RESPONSE SYSTEMS**

Promoting behavior change by providing incentives and sanctions for desired and undesired behaviors, respectively, is not a new approach. Indeed, many of the important components of graduated response systems rely on instrumental learning and operant conditioning principles, theories with nearly a century of support. Across settings and populations, including school classrooms and adolescent substance use treatment programs, as well as among youth with behavioral concerns, research has demonstrated that these principles effectively promote positive behavior change. Research also has indicated that although incentives and sanctions should be used in combination, the ratio should significantly favor incentives. To successfully promote positive behaviors and inhibit negative behaviors, researchers have suggested that responses should be delivered in a ratio of 4 incentives to 1 sanction.

Research suggests that responses are most effective in shaping behaviors if they are:

- **CERTAIN** Responses should be delivered such that if an identified behavior occurs, a specific response then occurs
- **SWIFT** Responses should be delivered as soon as possible after the behavior occurs
- **TARGETED** Responses should be given only when a specified behavior is performed
- **PROPORTIONATE** Severity and type of responses should match the severity and type of behavior exhibited
- **FAIR** Responses should be delivered in a transparent and equitable manner to encourage youths' trust in the probation process



## APPLICATION OF GRADUATED RESPONSE SYSTEMS IN JUVENILE PROBATION

The Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers' (PCCJPO) Graduated Response Workgroup developed a document entitled, "Graduated Response Guiding Principles and Protocol Development", to provide the foundation for the development of graduated response systems in the Commonwealth's juvenile justice system. The Workgroup developed the following mission statement:

*A graduated response system uses incentives and sanctions to foster the pro-social behavior of juvenile justice-involved youth, promote accountability, restore victims, and decrease recidivism. Through a structured process that accounts for a youth's level of risk, needs, and responsivity, graduated responses recognize and reinforce positive behaviors and provide proportional responses to negative behaviors to improve short- and long-term outcomes. Responses are certain, swift, targeted, proportionate, and fair.*

The mission statement is built upon the set of values and beliefs and organized in the areas of: Rationale for Graduated Responses; Engagement of the Youth and Family; Application of Graduated Responses; and Benefits of Graduated Responses.

In practice, graduated response systems encourage prosocial behaviors by providing incentives, and discourage harmful behaviors by providing sanctions in a structured, systematic, and fair manner. Graduated response systems often utilize a matrix in which the desirability of positive behavior or severity of negative behavior corresponds to a prescribed range of responses in the form of either an incentive or sanction, and accounts for a youth's level of criminogenic risk.

- Incentives provide youth with opportunities to achieve positive short-term goals, as well as long-term goals. Applying incentives allows juvenile justice professionals to facilitate behavioral change in youth by "catching them doing something good." Incentives generally take one of two forms. Something positive can be given (e.g., verbal acknowledgement, a certificate, a book), or something considered by the youth to be negative can be taken away or diminished (e.g., easing curfew restrictions, fewer reporting requirements).
- Sanctions provide youth with opportunities for learning and behavior change, as well as hold youth accountable and protect the community. Sanctions must clearly be delineated and objective. Consequently, sanctions are often identified on a grid organized around the seriousness of the noncompliance and the risk level of the youth. Carefully constructed sanctions grids provide juvenile justice professionals with a guide for consistent administration, and may include responses such as verbal reprimand, writing assignments (thinking reports), curfew restrictions, increased reporting requirements, restriction of activities, or extension of period of probation supervision.

Graduated response systems have been identified as a Stage Three: Behavioral Change activity within Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System Enhancement Strategy, and are integral to Pennsylvania's mission to provide balanced and restorative justice.

<sup>1</sup>"Graduated Response Guiding Principles and Protocol Development" developed by the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers. July 2015, pg. 3.