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The end of innocence: Inside Britain's child prisons

Paul Vallely: As the Edlington 'torture boys' face sentencing for horrifying violence, can secure children's homes ever offer redemption?



The car turns into the driveway of the large Edwardian house, but it ignores the front door and sweeps on to the low, new brick-built extension at the side of the house. The windows there are of reflective glass. Outsiders can't see in. But the occupants can see out.

As the car approaches, a shutter at the side of the building rises. After the car has entered, it falls. In the control room, where staff survey two banks of close-circuit TV screens – from 16 external and 16 internal cameras – the staff press the button to close the shutter. Only when it has clanged back into place are the car doors opened. Two men get out of the back. So does the small boy who has been sitting between them.

This is not one of the two boys from Edlington, near Doncaster, who will be sentenced this week for a sadistically violent attack committed when they were aged just 10 and 11 on two other boys of similar age. But it is a boy who has committed a crime like that. Only a minority of such cases come to public attention.

The child is one of the 150 children in Britain today who are so violent, sometimes at an age as young as 10, that they have to be locked up. The building is one of 10 secure children's homes throughout England – with innocuous names like Red Bank, Vinney Green, Barton Moss, East Moor, Hillside and Clayfield – which keep them under lock and key, for the protection of the public and, in many cases, for the good of the children themselves.

It was in a home like this that the 10-year-old killers of the toddler James Bulger – Robert Thompson and Jon Venables – served their eight-year sentences. Venables was held in the same unit that had previously held another child killer, Mary Bell, who was also only aged 11 when she was convicted of killing a three-year-old and a four-year-old in two separate

attacks. It is to two separate homes like these that the Edlington brothers, the “devil boys” as the tabloids called them, will be taken.

The boy does his best to look composed and confident. But he has lost some of his swagger. He is no longer in control of his own life. That had been brought home to him in the car on the long drive from the courthouse to the secure unit. He had been asked if he would like a McDonald’s, since he had been whisked out of the court with no food, and it had been a long drive. But they had stopped at a drive-through, and the food had been passed through the driver’s window so the boy had no chance to escape. In the secure unit there are locks on every door, and the keys are on a chain from the manager’s belt.

The boy is escorted from the garage across a corridor along which he can hear the noise of other children in the dining room. He glances nervously towards the sound as he is shepherded into a meeting room with a long, narrow table and works of art on the walls, done by previous inmates. There is a painting from the inside of a cave, looking out to the blue-grey daylight. There is a Banksy-style stencil of a black-and-white rock thrower in mid-hurl, his missile replaced by a bunch of flowers. There is a realist daub of a pot of flowers, withered and dead.

“Whether or not they admit it, no matter how hard they are, they’re scared,” the unit’s manager, a social worker with two decades of experience of detaining these children, tells me when the boy is gone. But before that he does an introductory run through of the unit’s daily regime.

“We get up at 7.30,” he begins. The boy looks shocked, as if he thought that 7.30 only happened in the evening. “Breakfast at 8.15. Then chores – hoovering, dusting – till 8.50. Then education, with lessons till 12.15, including a short break, and then lunch. Then education again until 3.30, after which there is some individual or group work till tea at 4.45. After that it’s homework for an hour...”

“Homework?” says the boy, incredulously. “Can’t I go on the Xbox?”

“Homework, for one hour, then after that Structured Activities – craftwork, model-making, gym, badminton, table tennis, volleyball,” says the manager. “Then after that maybe some time on the Xbox, if you’ve earned the privilege. We have supper at 8.30 and then it’s off to bed with everybody, depending on their age, locked in by 9.30.”

“9.30? I don’t go to bed at 9.30.”

“You do now.”

The manager lays down the other rules and sets out the ethos and the expectations of the unit. “We don’t tolerate bullying. We don’t accept violence or aggression or behaviour that puts others at risk. There is no smoking or alcohol allowed ...” and on he goes, advising the boy not to disclose to the other inmates the reason he has been sentenced. There is a hierarchy of crimes for imprisoned children, as there is for adults, with some seen as glamorous – a response the unit wants to discourage – and others provoking bullying.

At the end, the unit’s manager asks: “Have you got any questions?” When the boy says “No”, he asks: “Would you like to phone your mum?”

The sooner a child settles in, the less trouble he will be. Arranging an early visit by a mother – even a mother whose behaviour has aggravated their child’s delinquency – is a key part of the initial strategy of normalisation.

The boy is conducted down the corridor. “The lights come on automatically, as you pass,” the manager tells him. “And cameras film everywhere, except in bedrooms. They record everything – for my safety, as well as yours.” He points to a flashing light in a fitting in the ceiling. “That identifies me, and my location, from my pager.”

They come to another locked door, with a keypad and a fingerprint scanner by it. “Every resident care worker has his own individual PIN number he must enter. And the scanner only works with a live finger. It wouldn’t work if someone had cut it off,” he says, and laughs. His is a grim humour, but there is a point to his jokes. “Always tell them everything,” he says later. “So they know, and they know you know.”

There is nothing here of the atmosphere of a Victorian gaol. There are no bars, but the windows are thick plastic that can’t be broken. The doors may look wooden, but that is veneer on a heavy steel core. “Young people are not here to be punished,” the manager says afterwards. “The punishment is being locked up.”

He takes the boy into the dining room. “Everyone puts on weight here,” jokes the manager. “The food is good, with three or four choices including salad, sandwiches and a healthy option. You can get chips, but only on Fridays.” The room is served from a hatch with a grille behind it, to prevent the inmates getting hold of the knives in the kitchen.

The boy turns to look at the staff behind the grille. But he is not interested in the food. He is avoiding the gaze of the dozen or so other residents, a mix of boys and girls aged between 12 and 15, although vulnerable boys can be allowed to stay until they are 16 before being sent to a Secure Training Centre, which houses 14-16 year olds, or a Young Offender Institution, for 16-18 year olds.

“Now remember what it was like on your first day,” the manager says to the others, introducing the boy by name. “And don’t go bombarding him with questions.” The kids sit three or four to a table, with an adult. There is a gender mix of staff, who wear their own clothes rather than uniforms as staff do in the units for older children. “We’re after something approximating to a parental relationship,” says the manager afterwards.

“We use first names here,” the manager tells the boy. “Because respect doesn’t come from titles. It has to be earned. And that’s a two-way thing. If you don’t like me, that’s alright, but if you call me a fucking knobhead we’ll deal with that.” It is a warning, but it is matter of fact and contains no menace.

They leave the others to their meal and walk through the unit. In the lounge the television set is boxed into a wooden bookcase with a huge Perspex screen in front of it. “They get smashed,” the manager shrugs to me. “You learn the hard way. After 20 years in the job I’m still learning.” The locked cupboards contain the unit’s DVD collection. “You can only watch films or play games with the appropriate age certificate; there’s no Grand Theft Auto in here,” he says. “The other cupboards are mainly filled with books. We’re very keen on books.”

The next room is a classroom with a whiteboard and five computer terminals. In the corner of the room is a carton full of baby dolls, black, white and Chinese-looking. Each has a programmable box in the back. "We use them to teach the kids something about looking after a baby. You can programme them so they wake up every two hours through the night and cry. The cry is piercing. If the doll is tossed aside or thumped, the box will register all that. We give them to boys as well as girls."

But this is just in passing. He is moving through the unit towards the sleeping quarters. Bedrooms, he calls them, but when he opens the last door and ushers the boy inside with the words "This is your room" he might as well use the word "cell".

It is frighteningly austere and spartan. The heavy plastic bed is built into the walls and floor and is topped with a three-inch mattress. The adjoining bathroom has its door locked open and set flush into the wall, so it offers no ligature points from which an inmate might hang himself. For the same reason there is no shelf below the mirror. There is no shower spout; the rose just emerges from the ceiling. There is no shower tray even, the water falls onto the bare floor. Even the hinges of the door have been fully recessed so there is nothing to which a belt, shoelace, shirt or other means of self-harm might be fixed.

No that such pieces of clothing are allowed in the cell. All must be left in a locker outside. Nothing is allowed into the cell which has not been risk-assessed. In the early stages not even photographs of home are allowed. Nor even the teddy bears which some 10-year-olds bring in with them – for these are child-killers who fall asleep sucking their thumbs and often wet the bed, the manager says afterwards. He sees them, though the hatch in the cell door through which a member of staff looks every 20 minutes throughout the night – having turned on the light to make sure they're asleep.

They are not even, at first, allowed a radio, though later they can save for one from the money they can earn for good behaviour. Reinforcing the positive, rather than punishing the negative, is the strategy these units have found, over the years, to be most successful. "When they have earned enough privileges they will be loaned a radio belonging to the unit, but they are very basic ones. They have to be because they often get smashed, as an expression of anger, distress or frustration when Mum or Dad doesn't turn up for a visit, or a phone call with girlfriend outside goes wrong."

The inmates are given 30 minutes' worth of phone calls free each day. "It's not a privilege," says the manager later. "We want to encourage them to talk. It's the first step to everything. Each has an approved list of people they can phone; they can't just can't just ring their Uncle Degsy who turns out to be the bloke they get their drugs from. But even kids who never had time for their mothers outside find they want to talk to their mums once they're in here. It's one of the first changes being locked up brings."

The walls of the cell are bare. A boy may be allowed to put up posters later, but nothing more. "You can't hide much behind a poster," the manager says. It will not be long before the process of small rewards begins. "We can have a good idea by the end of the first week how they are going to behave. It's amazing how quickly residential staff get to know the kids."

Inside the boy looks around the stark cell. The door thuds shut with a deep resonating thud behind him. He lies down on his bed and stares at the high white bare ceiling. A ghostly

disembodied voice echoes eerily from the intercom by the hatch in the door. “You alright then?”

He replies with a single word and turns his head into his pillow and begins to cry. They call it a secure children’s home. But he is in prison. There is no mistaking that.

No child is born evil. But they are creatures of their parents and of circumstance. Children who commit violent crimes almost always share a similar background. Their parents are poorly educated, unemployed and often suffer from depression or other mental health problems; many are drug abusers or on the fringes of criminality. They often have large families but are also divorced or separated.

An authoritative survey of the mental health of young offenders published in the British Journal of Psychiatry in 2006 studied 301 young criminals aged 10 to 18 years. It found that 74 per cent had a family structure which had broken down, with only 36 per cent of their biological parents still married or cohabiting. More than a third of them had been in care – with many moved frequently from one home or foster home to another. One in three had a borderline learning disability, and one in five had an IQ below 70.

“It’s very rare for a child involved with homicide or torture to come from a background with none of these risk factors,” says Dr Eileen Vizard, a child and adolescent psychiatrist who runs the National Clinical Assessment and Treatment Service for the NSPCC, and who gave evidence at the Bulger trial.

These risk factors expose such children to a range of damaging experiences. They may witness repeated domestic violence or sexual abuse from an early age. They may be exposed to adults having sex in front of them and may routinely view slasher films or pornography left lying around the house.

“They are brought up with no boundaries, or inappropriate ones,” says Pam Hibbert, who was until recently assistant director of policy at the children’s charity Barnados and before that was a manager at Red Bank secure unit, where Mary Bell and Jon Venables served their sentences. “Children develop empathy from the way they are treated, not just fed and sheltered, but cuddled and stimulated. But the mothers themselves are often so needy.”

Many were themselves brought up by dysfunctional parents who transmit their inadequacies to a new generation.

Inconsistency is one of their hallmarks. “One night they get a crack around the head from their mum because she’s pissed; the next they get a cuddle; they just never know where they are,” says Gareth Jones, one of the country’s senior Youth Offending Team managers – who are the first members of the justice system to come into contact with such children when they break the law.

Typically, the inconsistency extends to discipline. These children are often allowed to roam the streets unchecked, but then arbitrarily subjected to harsh punishments.

The father of the Edlington boys was a violent alcoholic whose idea of instilling discipline was beating his children with golf clubs. He enjoyed forcing his sons – one of whom has been serving a sentence for mugging a woman of 68 at knife-point – to fight one another; if they refused, he hit them. He showed them violent and sadistic DVDs. Their mother, who has seven sons by three different fathers, admitted that she gave the boys cannabis to calm them down afterwards. At other times, neighbours reported, the young brothers were left to their own devices and were regularly seen scavenging for food or clothing which they pulled from skips.

“Such erratic and inconsistent behaviour, veering from the extremely harsh to the indifferent, cannot be called discipline,” says Pam Hibbert.

Though the tabloid press routinely uses phrases like “evil” and “monsters” to describe children who commit horrendous crimes, it is hard to escape the bald conclusion that such kids are victims too. The criminologist Professor Gwyneth Boswell of Boswell Research Fellows and the School of Allied Health Professions, University of East Anglia, researched 200 children convicted of extreme offences throughout the Nineties. She discovered that 91 per cent of killers and violent kids had experienced physical, sexual or emotional abuse or had experienced some form of traumatic loss like the death or disappearance of a parent. More than a third had undergone both abuse and traumatic loss.

When Mary Bell killed two small children in 1968, the nation was shocked by the details of the murders. She had strangled the boys but in one case she had taken a pair of broken scissors and made light cuts to his genitals after the little child was dead. But what did not come out at the time was that Mary’s mother, a prostitute who had tried to kill Mary on several occasions, had forced the five-year-old girl to perform oral sex acts with her clients.

“The public rarely gets to hear about backgrounds like Mary Bell’s amid all the salacious material from the court case,” Professor Boswell says. Even so, a large number of children in Britain today grow up in the heavily disadvantaged circumstances that all these academic studies reveal, yet only a tiny percentage grow into violent criminals. What are the extra factors which tip them into extreme violence?

Until recently it had become the received wisdom that in the old nature/nurture debate it was the way a child was brought up which was the key determinant. Violent children perhaps had lacked any positive influence from a significant adult, like a supportive teacher or relative. But more recent research is turning the spotlight also back onto the physiology of the child’s brain, genetic influences and neuropsychological deficits.

New technologies like brain mapping are providing medical evidence to suggest that behaviour affects the physical development of the brain. “The way these children have been treated early in life can affect the size and functioning of the brain,” says Dr Vizard. “It can be altered by neglect. The frontal lobes, which are to do with executive function and empathy, can be physically different; the circuiting in the brain has been affected. So we’re not looking here at risk factors or brain function, but a complex interaction between both.”

What is exercising Dr Vizard is whether psychiatrists and forensic psychologists might be able to predict that interaction. Her research suggests that there are two types of children who share many of these disadvantaged backgrounds.

The first group are children whose bad behaviour, though sometimes very extreme, will peak in adolescence – the time of life when high risk-taking and poor decision-making is normative. But they will then become, by and large, law-abiding citizens, albeit with a criminal record, by the time they are adults.

But the behaviour of those in the second group will progressively worsen the older they get. They will turn into extremely dangerous adults. Dr Vizard characterises the second group as displaying what she calls Emerging Severe Personality Disorder (ESPD). They are potential psychopaths.

The two groups share many problems – childhood abuse, inconsistent parenting, mothers and fathers with mental health problems. And they share many psychological characteristics – they are all hyperactive, impulsive and physically aggressive. These traits can be detected when the child is as young as three, and they increase through to adolescence. Retrospective statistical analysis shows that the potential psychopaths display all these problems to a far greater extent. Yet it is hard early on for teachers, social workers or other adults to detect the behavioural differences which mark out the ESPD child from those with lesser forms of conduct disorder.

But Dr Vizard has, in a Home Office research study into 280 children with abusive and violent behaviour, uncovered two significant factors. “There were two things I wasn’t expecting,” she says. “The first is a strong association with cruelty to animals.” The borderline between curiosity and cruelty is indistinct in many children, but we are talking here not about kids pulling the legs off spiders but of repeated patterns of cruelty to higher-order animals.

At its most extreme is the 10-year-old who trapped a cat and killed it by slowly slicing it with a knife, in order to see – he later told a psychiatrist, with icy logic – how much he could cut off the animal before it died. But ESPD children, says Dr Vizard, “stamp on small hamsters or mice. They squeeze them or burst them, set fire to their fur. It is gratuitous cruelty for which there can be no justification”. One of the Edlington brothers was seen before his arrest smashing ducklings against a tree in a park to kill them.

“The other factor was a strong association with inappropriate sexual behaviour in general,” says Dr Vizard. “Everything from putting sticks up people’s bottoms to sex with animals.” Of the sample in her major study, 59 per cent of offenders had sexually abused a child five years younger than them, and 9 per cent had engaged in sexual activity with animals. “One fifth of these offenders have convictions for sexual offences before they move on to violent offences.”

Some of the distinct characteristics of these potential psychopaths are now clear. They have a grandiose sense of self-worth. They are stimulation seekers. They cannot control their tempers. They lie pathologically. They have shallow affections. They are callous, lack empathy and cannot easily differentiate between people and objects. They manipulate for personal gain. They have poor anger control. They lack remorse or the ability to accept responsibility for their actions. And they have great criminal versatility.

“More research is needed on how to identify this sub-group who may develop psychopathy very early on,” says Dr Vizard. “And the Government should fund research into new treatment approaches for these disturbed children. It could save the public purse millions by

preventing them from ever entering the criminal justice system.” A place in a secure unit can cost as much as £229,950 a year for each child.

Decisions on how to handle extremely violent children begin to be made even before they are sentenced. Once a child has been found guilty of a serious offence the court will order pre-sentence reports.

The task of producing that is down to one of Britain’s 159 Youth Offending Teams; in a routine case it takes around three weeks. “We will talk to the police, the victim, look at previous convictions, visit the kid’s home and parents, talk to their teachers, education psychologists and education case-workers,” says Gareth Jones, the vice-chair of the Association of Youth Offending Team Managers, who has worked 25 years in the criminal justice system. “Once they have been found guilty, the police give us access to a whole lot more information on the offence.

“One of the skills we need is to be downright nosy, to ask difficult questions for parents: What time does he come in? Do you really know where he’s been? How many partners have you had in the last six months? They often say: ‘What’s that to do with you?’ but we persist.”

They work with the offender too. “We find out what is their thinking, attitude, and sense of culpability. We need to take a view on what is the risk of them reoffending,” he says.

In serious cases the court will require a report from a psychiatrist, a forensic psychologist and the secure home where they were on remand.

The Youth Offending Team report will then recommend a sentence to the court. “We look at what is an appropriate punishment, what is needed to protect the public, what is needed to make therapy and rehabilitation effective,” Gareth Jones says. “That means considering what they need in terms of education, drug abuse work, parenting courses etc. And we have to think what is needed for their protection – 33 young people have killed themselves inside in recent years.” And almost one third of suicides occur within the first week of someone arriving in custody.

A wide range of options are available to the courts. In less serious cases a community supervision order may be all that is deemed necessary. But in cases of extreme violence there are three possibilities, according to Tim Bateman, a visiting research fellow in criminology at the University of Bedfordshire who is also Youth Crime Policy Officer with the crime reduction charity Nacro. “Detention in a mental hospital is one, if there is a diagnosis of schizophrenia, hearing voices or some such,” he says. “But it is very rare for such diagnoses to be made quite so clearly with people of this age; such a placement would be quite rare.” What is most common is a fixed-term sentence, from which they would be released halfway through, or an indeterminate sentence, with a recommended tariff at the end of which they will only be released, on lifelong licence, with the approval of the Parole Board.

“For children who pose a serious risk to the public – having been convicted of arson, GBH, rape or homicide, or who exhibit a pattern of behaviour which suggests they might do it again – the indeterminate sentence is often the preferred option,” Tim Bateman says. They will only be released if the Parole Board determines that they no longer represent a serious risk to the

public, that they have come to an understanding of their offence and exhibit remorse, and that there is evidence of change.

“It’s quite a high threshold. And they are only released on licence and can be called back to jail at any time,” he adds. “The tariff has to be fixed to strike a balance between the punishment being seen to fit the seriousness of the crime, and the child being able to see light at the end of the tunnel, so we don’t undermine their motivation to change. That’s important for all criminals, but particularly for children who are less culpable, less responsible, and have a more rapid potential for change than adults. Children can change; developmentally that’s what children do.”

The other key decision is on where to detain the child criminal. Those over 16 who are not considered vulnerable are usually sent to a Young Offender Institution (YOI), which can house up to 360 young people in wings of up to 60 individuals. Those between 14 and 15 are usually sent to a Secure Training Centre (STC). These are smaller and have a higher staff-to-child ratio. But the youngest and more vulnerable offenders are sent to one of the 10 secure children’s homes run by a handful of local authorities.

“Decisions are largely made on grounds of cost,” says Tim Bateman. “A place in a secure children’s home costs around £200,000 a year; in an STC it is around £150,000 and in a YOI it is £50-80,000.” Which is why 85 per cent of kids who are locked up are in a Young Offender Institution – though it would be cheaper to send them to Eton.

Care is undoubtedly better in a secure children’s home. Secure homes have residential care-workers with greater training and lower staff turnover. There has never been a child death in a secure home, whereas there have been in both STCs and YOIs. Which is why the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Woolf, when he lowered the tariff on the Bulger killers, cited as his reason that transferring Thompson and Venables to the “corrosive atmosphere” of a Young Offenders Institution could undo the good done by eight years in a secure home.

Where an offence involves two children, they are almost invariably sent to separate secure units. The Edlington brothers have been kept in secure units more than 50 miles apart. And when they have briefly met at court appearances, social workers monitored their conversations.

“Co-offenders are kept apart because keeping them together may allow each to reinforce in the other’s mind a joint rationale or self-justification for their offence,” says Tim Bateman. Where psychopaths tend to stand outside the values of the group to which they belong, sociopaths have a sense of right and wrong that is based on the values of their criminal group. “And the two offenders may have played different roles in the offence,” Tim Bateman adds. “There may be a big age difference, one may be 14 and the other 10. One may have had a string of previous offences, and the other none. And they may be released at different times if one has made more progress than the other.”

But many experts are wary of the suggestion that in a crime one child may be the leader and the other merely a follower.

“We have two kids who are quite OK when they are on their own but who, when they get together, become a rather nasty unit,” says Gareth Jones. “The idea that there’s a follower and

a leader is a bit reductive,” agrees Pam Hibbert. “Yes, kids egg each other on. But they can’t absolve themselves of responsibility by blaming the other.”

“You might ask one child, ‘Why did you stick the knife in the old man’s eye?’” says Dr Derek Indoe, a clinical and forensic psychologist with the Child and Adolescent Service at the Bristol Hospital for Sick Children. “But it may well be as revealing to ask the second child, ‘Why did you pass the knife over to your friend? What did you really think he was going to do with it? Might he not have done it had you not passed it?’ “

If you don’t split them up it may be difficult for them to accept their own responsibility for what happened. “Removing them from the relationship with their co-offender,” says Pam Hibbert, “may be a key part of removing them from the chaos in which they have been living.”

The general public wants violent criminals to be locked up. When the criminal is a child – who has perpetrated some cold and sadistic brutality – many people’s first instinct is to want that evil banished from public gaze for a very long time, if not indefinitely.

But when our heads over-rule our hearts we want something more. We want children – like the two young brothers from Edlington, near Doncaster, sentenced this week to x years in custody for shocking acts of gratuitous violence against two young children – to understand and acknowledge the impact of their actions upon their victims. We want them to demonstrate genuine contrition. We want them to be changed.

But now that they have been locked up, what will happen to them? How will that process of change begin?

“There is always an impatience in the outside world to get onto addressing the crime,” says Dr Sue Bailey, a consultant child and adolescent forensic psychiatrist who has studied more than 250 child murderers in her 30 year career, and was an expert witness at the Bulger trial in which two 10-year-olds, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, tortured and murdered the toddler James Bulger. “But if you do that too soon children like this will close down. And then you will have to begin again more imaginatively.”

But that is not where mental health experts start when they get such children into custody. “Psychiatry and psychotherapy do not produce a magic bullet inside secure units,” says the criminologist Tim Bateman of the University of Bedford who is also Youth Crime Policy Officer for Nacro. “It’s much more first of all about providing a structured and nurturing environment to compensate for the normal childhood they never had.”

The child psychiatrist Dr Eileen Vizard, who also handled the Bulger killers, agrees. “One of the main therapeutic agents is the stability of the place,” she says. “These children are taken away from disrupted backgrounds, with no boundaries, and dangerous adults, and are put somewhere where they are safe, fed and housed and told No by people who understand how to set limits. It’s tough love. It’s a great skill, creating an experience that approximates to a proper family life.”

One of the professionals who did that at Red Bank secure children's unit at Newton-le-Willows when Jon Venables was detained there agrees. "Children whose lives have been lives in chaos, with no boundaries, feel profoundly unsafe," Pam Hibbert says. "Their offence is often a mask for their own vulnerability; if you get in first, they think, you won't get hurt. So first you make them feel safe. You give them someone they feel is interested in them. For some it's their first proper relationship with an adult and that milieu is as important as any therapy. And they can shift from being kids who are very difficult to handle to kids who on the whole respond very quickly."

It is difficult for those of us with more normal upbringings to understand how radical a shift this is for many of these problem children. "You have to start with socialisation," says Professor Gwyneth Boswell. "Just getting up at the same time every day and eating regular meals [rather than grazing in front of the television set] is a big change for a lot of them. Some have to be taught how to use a knife and fork. Many have never eaten at a table."

"Many have to be taught something as basic as taking turns," says Professor Bailey, who works with the Greater Manchester West Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust treating extremely disturbed children. "You have to do all that, developing various social skills and life skills, before you can get to a point where they can begin to engage." That can mean spelling out in laborious detail what might be obvious to a normal child. "Sometimes they don't even understand what they have done wrong, within the unit, how they have broken the rules. You have to explain: if you do this then this is what will happen to you."

The biggest single factor, outside normalising the young offender's relationships with the unit's staff and their fellow inmates, is education. "It is the tool which opens up a young person's confidence in themselves and awakens them to the possibility that they can achieve something while they are detained," says Roy Walker, who ran Sutton Place, the secure unit in Hull, until it was closed by the local council in July – something which is happening all over the country as councils seek to cut costs. He is the outgoing chair of the units' umbrella group, the Secure Accommodation Network.

The quality of the education inside the secure units is high. "We teach the National Curriculum but in very small groups," he says. "The kids all have Individual Education Plans based on their perceived needs which are constantly reviewed. We have Ofsted all over us."

Units do not just operate to a normal 38-week school year but run continuously apart from two weeks over Christmas and New Year. It is not easy work. "These kids have a lot of catching up to do," says the criminologist Tim Bateman. "They will often also begin with a very negative attitude saying they can't do schoolwork and won't try." But the staff in the units remain relentlessly positive. "Our students have a lot of catching up to do, particularly on literacy and numeracy on which most of these kids are well behind," Roy Walker says.

Professionals and researchers have no doubt as to the value of this work. "These children often begin to respond very quickly to education," says Prof Boswell. From being the barely literate underdog in a family of seven brothers, where his older siblings picked on him brutally, Robert Thompson passed five GCSEs and several A-levels and developed a strong interest in design and fashion. Jon Venables passed seven GCSEs and did A-levels too – a level of attainment that neither had much hope of achieving before their arrest.

But it is not simply learning for learning's sake. Nor is it done purely with an eye to equipping the youngsters with the wherewithal to find a job when they are eventually released. Literacy and numeracy skills are central to the therapy which is at the heart of the work of these secure units.

Locking up dangerous delinquents protects the public in the short-term. But if the risk is to be permanently removed that requires child offenders to change. The key to this, says Roy Walker, who has worked for 17 years with such children, is to get them to focus on their offence and the impact it has had on others. "To help them to ensure that they won't offend again as soon as they get out," he says, "they need to develop a greater awareness."

Yet therapists cannot start by asking them to think about their victims or the impact their crime has had upon their mother or those who love them. "You have to start by getting them to focus on what has happened to them and how they feel about it," says Pam Hibbert, a former co-manager of Red Bank secure home. "You have to get them to develop an awareness of how they feel about themselves before you can move on to dealing with how they think their victim might have felt. Whatever crime they have committed you always have before you an extremely damaged and vulnerable child and you have to focus on them."

The psychiatrist Professor Sue Bailey agrees. "You have to start from where they are," she says. "What they think their life is about. What they think their needs are. What they want out of life. It gives you a common point from which you can gradually introduce other concerns and points of view. But what you must do first is build trust and engagement."

And yet this must not be a process which indulges the child. "You set boundaries, you don't stand for cheek," says Pam Hibbert. "But you have to treat them with respect and listen to what they say," says Roy Walker. "You have to inculcate in them a confidence that adults are going to deliver for them. But that doesn't mean agreeing with them." Rather it means realigning their concepts of fairness and right and wrong with those of the rest of society.

That can take some time and breakthroughs can come unexpectedly. For one 15 year old who had stabbed and killed another boy in the playground it came when he said to his unit manager: "Looking back it all began to really go badly wrong for me when I was about nine. I'd had a row with my mum and said I was leaving home and she said: 'OK, bugger off them.' So I went, and she let me." Such moments of epiphany can be a turning point.

But there may be a long road to travel before that happens. Part of the difficulty is the huge variation in problems with which kids present. "Some are traumatised by the experience of the courtroom," says Prof Bailey. "Some have depression which was never diagnosed before. Some get hostile, some go quiet and withdrawn. Some have sensory problems [with hearing or eyesight and have never been able to hear in class or they see the whiteboard]. Some are dealing with their own abuse. Some had been living with inappropriate roles, parenting their siblings or caring for a parent."

Some are unresponsive to the most basic tool of therapy – speech. "Quite often for these kids words have become meaningless," says Sue Bailey. "They have lived lives where they have been ignored and left to their own devices and now suddenly everyone is talking at them and

asking question – police, social workers, courts, psychiatrists – are yapping at them. It’s all words, words, words.” Many of them just switch off.

In such cases psychiatrists have to resort to indirect means like art therapy. “It’s more than seeing what they draw,” Prof Bailey explains. “It’s much more sophisticated than that. But they can get very worked up doing it. And though you do your best to calm them down at the end you have to negotiate with the secure unit staff so the child doesn’t get over-penalised if there is a spill-over from the session.”

Units operate points-based systems which allow their residents to earn privileges by good behaviour. Staff have to work strike a delicate balance between discipline and incentive. “It’s a tough job,” the psychiatrist says. “The degree of damage these kids go in with gives carers a really difficult task. To use a medical analogy, we are not asking staff to monitor these young people’s blood pressure, we are asking them to do heart transplants.”

Some of the work can be done in groups. “Group work, if it’s done well, is particularly effective for children entering their teens,” says Gwyneth Boswell, “because they identify much more with their peers than with any adult. They can learn very powerfully in a group, though it has to be led by a skilled adult to steer the focus away from members expressing negative antisocial views.”

But the approach poses extra risks. The units, which range in size from just a dozen inmates to as many as 36, have a real mix of residents. Some have been sentenced for very serious crimes, others are on remand, others are in there to protect them from themselves – there has been a big increase in the number of protective welfare orders since the Baby P case.

“They are not friends; they have been put together,” says the former manager of the Hull centre, Roy Walker. “They can be here for 24 hours or eight years. And the group dynamic changes every time someone comes in or goes out. These kids are in some respect loners; they may hang around in groups but they are not really socialised.”

Sex offenders are particularly responsive to group therapy. It is heavily used in units like Red Bank which specialises in children who have committed sex offences. Behavioural change programmes make particular use of group dynamics. “They can deconstruct why things which are not good for other people are also not good for themselves,” says Prof Boswell. “It encourages them to work that out for themselves rather than just someone else telling them it.”

But for others group work is unsuitable. “Much depends upon the skills and deficits of the young person,” says Prof Bailey. “Some just wouldn’t understand what was going on. Some would try to manipulate the group. Some may just not be ready educationally and might not understand the nuances – they’ll just think it’s people talking sex to them.”

Most work is driven by the principles of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy which aims to modify dysfunctional thinking by changing patterns of behaviour and teaching the offender to avoid the early signs of temptation and trouble.

“There is very good evidence that many children in secure units respond well to vigorous input from trained supervised therapists,” says Dr Eileen Vizard, who is chief psychiatrist for the NSPCC. The range of programmes ranges through anger management, family

relationship therapy, drug abuse and diet interventions, occupational therapy, and music, speech and language therapy. Part of the treatment is to change offenders masturbatory fantasies from unhealthy to healthy ones. The strategy operates by rewarding good behaviour, withdrawing privileges for bad behaviour and introducing time-out sanctions which are a more sophisticated version of the naughty step for small children.

But there are some offenders for whom this does not work. They are the children with Emerging Severe Personality Disorder who could grow up to become psychopaths. Dr Vizard estimates that there are between one and two thousand children in this category in the UK. "One of the characteristics of these children is that they can't interpret facial expressions," she says. Research has shown that they over-interpret hostility in other people. They mistakenly rate neutral faces as angry. "They can't tell the difference between fear and sadness in another person's face."

They can describe what they see but, because they lack empathy, they can't understand it. One told Dr Vizard about someone he had raped: " 'She was crying, yeah, there were tears on her face. Her face was screwed up.' But he couldn't work out what was in the mind of the other person. He didn't know what all that meant, and he didn't care." Psychologists theorise that the ability to recognise fear in other people comes from a childhood developmental stage that is critical for learning that other people are sentient feeling organisms. Such children have not developed this 'theory of mind'.

There is something else that is critical. Professor Mark Dadds, a psychologist at the University of New South Wales has been investigating this callous unemotional trait in children. He has discovered that most problem children have high emotional states. "They'll be anxious, they'll be emotionally reactive, so things upset them, they react aggressively to frustrating situations," he says. But the ESPD sub-group do not react emotionally. Rather their aggression is predatory and cold. "Now predatory aggression is different, it's someone who's on the lookout for an opportunity to be aggressive in order to further their own ends."

And such children, being low in emotion, are not very susceptible to the disapproval of others. Parents' attempts to correct their behaviour are routinely frustrated. They are difficult to discipline. "Attempts to punish them become escalating and quickly move into very extreme levels," Prof Dadds says. In a study of 56 such boys, aged 4 to 9, he discovered that the more callous and unemotional a boy was, the less likely he was to respond well to punishments for misbehaviour. Rewards and encouragement were far more productive – which may explain why, to the great disgust of the tabloid press, the Edlington brothers were taken on treats – to watch a Doncaster Rovers football match and to the seaside – to encourage an improvement in their behaviour.

Mark Dadds has discovered another technique. He remembered that the ability to recognise fear is also impaired in people with damage to the amygdala – nuclei deep inside the medial temporal lobes of the brain which play a role in forming and storing memories associated with emotional events. Doctors had discovered that this deficit can be temporarily corrected by simply asking such patients to focus on the eyes of other people. Prof Dadds has pioneered the technique with ESPD children.

"You just say to them: 'Would you mind looking at me while I'm speaking,'" says Dr Vizard. "It is not a reprimand but a request and it seems to work. "They still might not be able to line up other people's experiences with their own. But you can use this to appeal to their self-

interest to motivate them to take part in treatment. You say: 'If you do this then you'll get a lesser sentence; if you do you will have fewer bad things to tell a future girlfriend about your self'." Doing the right thing, its advocates insist, will turn into wanting to do the right thing.

"There's a chance that, if that continued over many years, their brain might right itself

because they are living in an environment where appropriate responses are encouraged," she says. "It's a measure of how plastic the child and adolescent brain is."

There is more to this than pious hope. Progress on offenders' treatment is monitored at monthly meetings between the child's their personal prison officer, education workers, psychiatrist, therapists, substance abuse worker, parents and Youth Offending Team case manager. In difficult cases they meet fortnightly, or even weekly.

Researchers have a number of techniques for assessing whether there has been a change in the attitudes and thinking of these young people. Psychological tests can be used at early, middle and later stages of the child's detention. They might, for example, be asked whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with statements such as:

- * I don't owe the world anything
- * If you back down from a fight people will think you're a coward
- * It makes me feel big when I push someone around
- * It's OK to hit someone if you just go crazy with anger
- * It's hard to get ahead without breaking the law now and again
- * I really care about how my actions affect others

"Of course some children learn how to give the 'right' answers," says the criminologist Professor Gwyneth Boswell. "But you also do qualitative in-depth interviews which will reveal any inconsistencies, probe the links in the chain as to the reasons why they offended, how far those reasons are being eradicated, and what is the risk of them doing it again in the future".

The evidence is that change can come and it can be thorough-going. Redemption is more than a theological construct, especially with the young. "Under the age of 18 teenagers are still developing rapidly, finding their own personality, and are more open to change," says Prof Boswell. "Everything we know about psychological development suggests that the younger you are the more malleable." The adolescent brain is in a state of constant pruning and rewiring and there are concomitant changes in thinking ability and emotional maturity.

Practitioners in secure homes confirm that. "A complete transformation can happen within four years, because of the speed at which children develop," says Pam Hibbert.

Some sections of society do not want to believe that. The sense of justice on display in the tabloid press is mired in notions of evil and retribution. It is not open to empirical evidence. The notion that reward rather than punishment is more productive is anathema to them – which is why they pillory approaches which offer incentives to children convicted of horrendous crimes.

When news leaked that the killers of James Bulger had, six years on, been taken to ice hockey games, productions of Shakespeare or on shopping trips to Sheffield and Manchester, the popular press whipped up a storm of protest. More generally the system of reward incentives which social workers called “intermediate treatment” was ridiculed as “free cruises for villains”.

Yet such outings make sense for those on long sentences – both as incentives to good behaviour and to prepare them to return to the outside world. As the end of their detention draws near they are allowed a wider range of visitors. They do some supervised home visits. They are allowed out with a care worker so they can get used to the bustle of shops, the noise of a pub or the press of a football crowd. Releasing them unprepared for all that would risk them being overwhelmed and raise the chances of problems.

Those convicted of the most serious offences still have to convince the Parole Board that they have developed an understanding of why they are locked up. They must show they have some understanding of the consequences of their actions and the pain caused to their victims. They must have developed a positive attitude to remorse. Above all they must convince the board that they are no longer a high risk to the rest of society.

Murder has a low recidivism rate anyway and none of those convicted for murder or manslaughter as children have ever gone on to repeat that kind of offence. The worst thing Mary Bell did after her release was commit benefit fraud.

But the child killers do not make up the majority of child prisoners. Most children in secure homes are inside for less than two 2 years. “The challenge with those on shorter sentences is to do something that will make a real difference,” says Roy Walker. “But you’ve got to do that in the context of what they’ll go back to when they return home.

“So you have to have an exit plan from the outset. If they are in for a long term you can aim towards getting them three A levels. But if it’s shorter you have to be realistic and perhaps identify just a couple of priorities you can reasonable hope to achieve.”

The problem is that those on short sentences go back to the chaotic world which spawned them. “The most violent offenders can come out from long sentences completely changed individuals,” says Nacro’s Tim Bateman. “And they are not going back to the circumstances that they left. But those who are in for six months, by contrast, often return to their old life with a predictably high return to drugs and crime.”

Those not in for such long sentences inevitably gravitate back to their families. The psychiatric social workers in the secure homes try to do some work with the families in preparation but with mixed results.

The good done by the education in the secure unit can be threatened too. “They have great educational opportunities inside,” says Roy Walker, “and then they are sent back to their old

school where very few people appreciate the quality of the education they have had inside – and where people assume that a leopard can't change its spots and often treat them with suspicion – to which the kids respond: 'Well, fuck me, if they're not even going to give me a chance then I'm off then'."

The irony is that the longer violent children are detained in secure units the greater the chance they have from benefiting long-term from the place. "It's an irony," laughs Roy Walker, "but it wouldn't be very good if we were spending £200,000 a year on these kids and they didn't improve".

The bitterest irony for him is when he sees kids crying on the day their sentence is up. "I've often seen them in tears because they do not want to go home".

It is a graphic reminder of our society's failure in its duty to break the inter-generational cycle of inadequacy, abuse and depravation which nurtured such children in the first place.