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## **USING ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY (ACT) IN OUR WORK WITH CARE LEAVERS - THE REBOOT WEST PROGRAMME**

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This resource is part of the Informing Futures toolkit, a free online resource for practitioners seeking to understand and support care and custody experienced young people.

For more information or queries on any of the topics covered in this toolkit, or to find out about training and consultancy we can offer please contact [enquiries@1625ip.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@1625ip.co.uk).

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# Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) in our work with care leavers - the Reboot West programme

## What is ACT?

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a psychological intervention that uses acceptance and mindfulness strategies, together with commitment and behaviour change strategies, to increase psychological flexibility. The notion of psychological flexibility is about being able to stay in contact with the present moment regardless of unpleasant thoughts, feelings or bodily sensations, while choosing behaviour and action based on the situation and personal values. ACT gives insight into how language entangles people into futile attempts to wage war against their own inner lives. It helps people learn how to make healthy contact with thoughts, feelings, memories, and physical sensations that have been feared and avoided. This help them gain the skills to recontextualize and accept these private events, develop greater clarity about personal values, and commit to needed behaviour change. [<https://contextualscience.org/act>]

We chose to use a model of ACT called DNA-V that has been developed specifically for working with adolescents. DNA-V was developed by the Australian clinical psychologists Louise Hayes and Joseph Ciarrochi. [<https://thrivingadolescent.com/dna-v-the-youth-model-of-act/>]

Link: This short animation summarises the DNA-V model of ACT

<https://youtu.be/EoXn2AOR3kI>

## What is Reboot West?

Reboot West is a four-year programme, funded by the DfE, working with care leavers aged 16-25 to support them into education, employment and training as well as helping them to achieve stability and well-being in their lives. A team of eight Coaches work across four local authorities in the West of England, co-located in their offices and embedded in their care leaver (or throughcare) teams. Coaches have caseloads of 28 young people each and are able to work with them for up to four years and develop strong relationships over that period. The care leavers we work are either NEET (not in education, employment or training) or at risk of NEET. Some have complex needs and are living in challenging circumstances.

## Why did we choose ACT for Reboot West?

Having spent several years working under our Psychologically Informed Environments Framework (PIE) underpinned by an understanding of the effect of attachment on young people's lives, we were keen to pilot an approach that helped young people 'let go' and

move-on in their lives. It felt important to have something that would work with adolescents recognising the transition to adulthood and allowing young people to act more 'adult'; (acknowledging that much of modern UK children's safeguarding practice works on a 'saving' children model). After some reading (particularly The Thriving Adolescent downloads) and discussion with others evidence indicated that ACT had been successful in Social Work with adolescents in other countries but was practically untested here. This formed the basis of the original Expression of Interest to the DfE, which was received with great interest, and the model grew from there.

### **How did we introduce ACT into Reboot West?**

Reboot West started in September 2018 and built up to a full team of Coaches by March 2019. The Coaches had a range of experience and skills, none had experience as therapeutic practitioners. The project manager and Coaches benefited from some or all of the following training (depending on when they joined the programme):

- Emotional health and wellbeing course (three half-day sessions enabling staff to learn how to use ACT in their own daily lives at home and work)
- Five half-day DNA-V kernels training for Reboot Coaches and local authority colleagues working with care leavers, each one covering a different element of the DNA-V approach, i.e. Advisor, Discover, Noticer, Self and social view, Values.
- An eight-unit on-line DNA-V course including video, written material and quizzes to check understanding. [<https://www.praxiscet.com/events/dna-v/>]

Coaches gradually grew their caseloads, working alongside young people focused on developing trusted relationships, getting them into or sustaining EET but also helping them with whatever else was most important to them. Over time Coaches introduced elements of ACT into their work with young people, for example, helping them to explore and articulate their personal values and identify what action they could take to move toward their goals.

### **Continuing to develop our ACT practice**

The Reboot Team (Coaches and project manager) have monthly group supervision with an educational psychologist who has extensive knowledge of ACT and the DNA-V model. He also provides regular one-to-one supervision to the project manager. The team is encouraged and enabled to use ACT in their own lives and how they interact with each other. For example, the project manager uses ACT in how she line manages the team.

Over time, the Coaches have become more confident and fluent in how they use ACT in their interactions with young people. In November 2019, Louise Hayes the co-creator of DNA-V visited the UK and spent a day with the Reboot Team and some team members attended her two-day training course on DNA-V. She was enormously complimentary about the Team's understanding and application of DNA-V in their work.

We are working to refine and develop the training and support framework available for internal and external colleagues in relation to ACT.

## What have we learnt?

It seems to be beneficial to have one, clear psychological framework that the whole team works within. This enables the team to learn together, trying things out, reflecting and developing their practice as a team. Regular clinical supervision is crucial to embed the use of ACT and to enable the practitioners to develop in confidence.

## What are the challenges?

It is unusual for ACT to be used by non-clinical practitioners and this brings some challenges. Many of the young people Reboot West work with have a history of trauma and continue to live in challenging situations. It can be difficult for Coaches, whose job is primarily to support young people with EET, to know where to draw the line between working in a psychologically informed way using ACT, and falling into a role more akin to that of a therapist. Although coaches are working in a therapeutic way, they are not therapists. The programme does not aspire to offer psychotherapy or to replace other therapeutic interventions which might be indicated for young people who have experienced trauma.

## How's it going?

The Reboot West programme has to date exceeded the targets set by funders i.e. young people getting into and sustaining EET as well as other stability and well-being indicators. As well as this, feedback from young people has been overwhelmingly positive about the relationships they have with their Coaches and what they have helped them to achieve. The Coaches have embraced ACT enthusiastically, finding it helps them in their own lives, enables them to cohere as a team and provides a clear framework and useful set of tools for working with their clients.

*Having already obtained his CSCS card, CS chose to work in construction as a labourer. Through 1625's Young Ambition project he was partnered with an employment agency who supported CS to access his first ever paid employment, and did everything they could to make the opportunity a successful one. On completing a couple of weeks work experience with them, CS realised he had learnt a vital lesson from his experience– he hates labouring! Grateful for the opportunity, CS has since reflected that "I wanted to be a labourer because I was always told it's all I was good for, not because it's what I really want".*

*This explorative approach can be critical in supporting someone denied these kinds of experiences in earlier life. The ACT approach of Reboot encourages young people to engage with their natural 'Discoverer' tendencies, and to track the outcomes of these experiments. The results then allow for more and more of their behaviour to be driven by what they feel is really important to them.*

*Thinking about the future CS said "I feel like I have choices now." For the first time CS sees his future as his decision.*