

BEHAVIOUR

Boxing clever for a fighting chance

It sounds counter-intuitive, but sports such as boxing can teach aggressive and disruptive children about the rules of life

ANNA CAIN

EVEN THOUGH I was one of the more supportive parents with children at the school, my son's behaviour was still appalling. He took it upon himself to ruin everybody's day, and in the end he was excluded. So I understand the total devastation that being kicked out of school can cause families.

The lives of most children who end up being excluded are a mess, with no consistent adult presence. They become rude, disruptive and unable to comply with any sort of instruction.

I've known children who were so violent at school that they attacked teachers and injured themselves; one smashed up a classroom and caused £10,000 worth of damage.

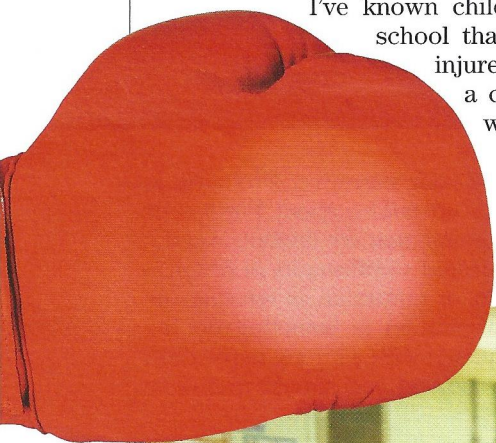
Mainstream schools are not equipped to deal with that level of destruction. So they send the students home, and the children think they've got

their way: they're king, playing at home on their PlayStations or, far worse, getting involved in gangs and fights out on the streets. They think they are in charge, untouchable, because no one can be bothered to take them on.

This is the point where schools, pupil referral units and charities need to think slightly differently. Traditional interventions are not working, so it's time to think outside the box. This is what my organisation did: we set up the Boxing Academy and, as the name suggests, we got excluded children in the ring, boxing.

Ring the changes

Using boxing as a means of tackling aggressive, disruptive conduct might seem counter-intuitive. Some children can't understand why, if they're getting into trouble for fighting, they are sent to learn to box. But we're not trying to improve their fighting technique, we're trying to change the way they think about their futures. It's about so much more than boxing. One



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Clubs

boy who was always getting into fights realised after six months with us that he was walking away from street fights because he no longer felt the need to prove anything. That is invaluable; that is saving lives.

The boxing ethos is all about control and discipline. We have a clear system of rewards and punishment that we are able to tailor to each child: doing push-ups for some, writing an essay for others. We will even go to their homes and confiscate precious belongings until their behaviour improves.

Punching the bags, weight training and skipping not only improve fitness but teach children to control anger and resolve conflict in a safe environment. More importantly, by accepting that there are rules to the game, children subliminally start to understand and accept that this is how the world works.

All our mentors are trained by the Amateur Boxing Association and many have also had their lives turned around by a boxing gym. They coach children four times a week in groups of seven, and stay with them from the ages of 13 to 16. They do robust and, at times, confrontational work with them.

Gobsmacking discipline

What these relationships provide is a strong, consistent adult role model; someone who is prepared to say “no” and stick to it. There is no substitute for that. The mentors will even go to a child’s home if they don’t turn up in the morning (with their parent’s permission). The children are gob-smacked, and we never have to do it twice. They are relieved to know that we are in charge, so they can get on with being children.

Another valuable lesson they learn in the ring is that losing is part of life. You get hit, fall down and get back up again. Many of the coaches are champions but they have all lost a fight, and they talk to the children about learning from failure.

Although we do care about exams, and some of our students do really well, we are not about results. We equip children to make progress on their own, so that they look at their earlier results and think, “I could do better than that.” The genuine breakthrough is the fact that they care.

Saved by the bell

We have tracked down 41 of 45 leavers since 2010 and 37 of them are still in college, a job or an apprenticeship. That is a spectacular turnaround; they would have left school with nothing.

I believe that any sport or activity can have the same effect. The bottom line is consistency and persistence. You have to be willing to have those difficult conversations, to enforce what you say you are going to enforce, to provide the constant reassurance, constructive feedback and stability that children need.

It could be a completely different sport or activity – perhaps even tiddlywinks. The goal is to help young people accept that there is a right way to approach learning, that someone else is in charge and that, if they do what their mentors tell them, they will succeed. For the first time, students see that their behaviour isn’t taking them anywhere and find that they want to change it.

When it comes to excluded students, we need to change tack and embrace solutions that may seem improbable or counter-intuitive. On the face of it, teaching violent students how to box seems ludicrous. But we have proved that, for some, it is the best intervention they could have. The lesson is clear: be adventurous and imaginative and students who have been written off can gain a second chance at education. ●

Anna Cain is chief executive of the Boxing Academy, which is supported by money raised through Sport Relief. Sport Relief 2014 is taking place on 21-23 March. Download resources at www.tesconnect.com/sportrelief

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