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Correctional Service  
Canada

Service correctionnel  
Canada

## RESEARCH BRIEF

COMMUNICATIONS AND CORPORATE DEVELOPMENT

### Research Brief

#### Rehabilitation Through Clearer Thinking: A Cognitive Model Of Correctional Intervention

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**Research Brief**

**Rehabilitation Through Clearer  
Thinking: A Cognitive Model  
Of Correctional Intervention**

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Rehabilitation Through Clearer  
Thinking: A Cognitive Model  
Of Correctional Intervention

Research Brief No. B-04

Prepared By:

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Correctional Service of Canada

May 1990

## **REHABILITATION THROUGH CLEARER THINKING: A COGNITIVE MODEL OF CORRECTIONAL INTERVENTION**

Target thinking, not behaviour.

This fundamental assumption reflects the core of the "cognitive model" of offender rehabilitation.

The cognitive model reasons that since "faulty thinking patterns" seem to be instrumental in propelling offenders toward reinvolvement in criminal activities, programs should try and change the way offenders think, not the way they act.

The development of the cognitive model is a fairly recent innovation in correctional treatment (Ross & Fabiano, 1985). The model is based on a substantial body of research indicating that many offenders do not seem to have acquired a number of cognitive skills essential to social adaptation. (Ross & Fabiano, 1985; Zamble & Porporino, 1988).

For example, many offenders lack self-control – they fail to self-regulate their behaviour and tend to be action-oriented, non-reflective, and impulsive.

Offenders also have difficulty with social perspective-taking. They often seem unable to look at the world through another person's perspective and they don't seem to be able to distinguish their own emotional states and thoughts from those of others.

With respect to cognitive style, offenders seem to reflect a tendency towards concrete rather than abstract thinking. Instead of thinking about problems, they "act out" without adequately considering or calculating the consequences of their actions.

The evidence also indicates that offenders are lacking in interpersonal problem-solving skills. In addition, they have not acquired adequate critical reasoning and planning skills.

The end result is that offenders become caught in a cycle of "thinking" errors – the most common error being to put the fault for their actions onto other people.

The cognitive model attempts to teach offenders relevant skills – such as thinking logically, objectively, and rationally without over-generalizing or externalizing blame – with the adoption of a social learning and educational approach.

Because the model directly targets the thinking styles that appear to be responsible for sustaining criminal behaviour, it is regarded as a very promising development in corrections.

The research on the effectiveness of the cognitive model has been positive. Recently, a Cognitive Skills Training Program piloted by the Correctional Service of Canada in two regions of the country has reported encouraging results from early follow-up information.

The program, stemming from the original work of Ross & Fabiano (1985), has been introduced in four sites, including both community and institutional settings.

## PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

The following details of program implementation are noteworthy for two reasons: first, as examples of a purposeful strategy developed to ensure the integrity of program delivery, and second, as an approach that would facilitate program endurance by fostering front-line staff acceptance and support.

- Extensive consultation was conducted with line managers and staff in order to explain the approach, outline plans, and ensure their support for the program.
- Individuals selected as the initial program "deliverers" were employees who volunteered for the assignment. They were chosen not on the basis of their professional qualifications or programming background, but as individuals who had the required interpersonal skills, values, commitments, and influence style to effectively model "social competence".
- These coaches were trained in an intensive and structured ten-day workshop that gave them considerable opportunity to practice program delivery.
- Quality control procedures were followed from the onset to ensure program integrity. Specifically, throughout program delivery, all coaches were periodically monitored via videotape, and bi-weekly conference calls were coordinated to discuss sessions and ensure that the service provided continued to conform to program principles. A consultation hot-line was also established with the national trainer, so as to immediately resolve any difficulties or concerns with particular program components. This kind of monitoring is an element often lacking in the introduction of correctional programming, but it is essential to ensuring that program implementation has actually occurred.

- Prior to start-up, all staff within the institution or facility where the program was being introduced received at least a half-day of awareness training. The objective was to provide all staff, even though they were not directly involved in the program, with sufficient awareness and understanding of the goals of the program to create a more broadly based environment of support, reinforcement, and consistent supervision which could assist offenders in maintaining "new skills" developed in the program.

## PROGRAM DELIVERY

Each program operates for approximately twelve weeks and is provided to small groups of six to eight participants in classroom settings.

Since we know that level of involvement and participation of offenders depends to a large extent on how well their motivation can be sustained, the program deliberately makes use of a number of different training techniques and teaching materials. The program employs a variety of audio-visual aids, games, puzzles, reasoning exercises, didactic and socratic teaching methods, seminars, and group discussion approaches. The techniques lack the appearance of therapy or school activities which may be aversive to many offenders. Furthermore, as the training requires concentrated attention and focus, program sessions never extend beyond two hours.

A critical aspect of program delivery is the sequencing and timing of each session. The various cognitive skills are taught in such a way that new skills are introduced only after certain "prerequisite" skills have been taught and practiced.

## PROGRAM EVALUATION

A special effort has been made to design a systematic and thorough evaluation of the cognitive program. Prior to the beginning of training sessions, all program participants are administered a battery of measures designed to assess their levels of cognitive skills and attitudes toward criminal activity. Following the completion of the program, offenders are reassessed so that changes can be tracked.

Preliminary findings have been very promising. Results have indicated statistically significant improvement on a number of important cognitive dimensions targeted by the program. The test scores have suggested that, following completion of Cognitive Skills Training, the participants are better able to appreciate the perspectives of others when they are faced with the task of interpreting social situations.

Scores on a conceptual level test have indicated that the offenders demonstrate more complexity in their views about such concepts as authority, rule structures, and critical feedback. In addition, they are able to generate a greater number of behavioral options on tasks that require the resolution of interpersonal conflicts.

The results from an analysis of attitudinal measures have shown that offenders also make positive changes in the direction of more pro-social thinking. It was found that the participants became less negative toward the law, courts, and police after completing the program. In a number of previous studies, positive changes on these attitudinal measures have been linked to reduced chances of future recidivism (Andrews and Wormith, 1989).

The program participants expressed a high degree of satisfaction with Cognitive Skills Training. Seventy-four percent of the program participants who completed an evaluation questionnaire felt that the program "was much better than any other program" to which they had ever been exposed. An additional 24% perceived the program to be "as good as any other program". Approximately three weeks after completing the program, 97% of the participants admitted that they found themselves using the skills that they learned.

Responses to open-ended questions also revealed that the offenders regarded the content of the program as highly relevant to their lives. In fact, offenders commonly indicated they had retained many of the concepts that were developed in the program. They also identified a number of concrete areas in which they had made improvements as a result of their training. Figure 1 shows the high proportion of offenders who perceived positive

change in some of the major areas addressed by the program.

The research also examined the issue of whether or not appropriate candidates were being selected for Cognitive Skills Training. Many programs are criticized because they are offered to offenders who are highly motivated, easy to work with, and not likely to recidivate regardless of their participation in programs. Our results indicate that the offenders who participated in the program were indeed those who were in most need of programming. Case Management Strategies (CMS) (Lerner, Arling & Baird, 1986) and scores on the Statistical Information About Recidivism Scale (SIR) (Nuffield, 1982) indicated that Cognitive Skills Training was being offered to offenders who were at high risk of failing upon release. In fact, 61% of the participants were classified in the "Fair to Poor" risk categories on the SIR and only 5.6% were classified as "Very Good" risks (cf. Figure 2).

## **PRELIMINARY POST-RELEASE FOLLOW-UP**

Early follow-up information on offenders who completed the Cognitive Skills Training Program is also encouraging. From our sample of 47 program participants, we examined the outcome status of 19 offenders who had been granted some form of conditional release and were followed-up in the community for at least three months. On average, the follow-up period was 6.2 months. During the follow-up period, 26.3% of the released offenders had been returned to penitentiary for new offenses or technical violations. We also gathered information on the outcome of a comparison group of 14 offenders who were selected for Cognitive Skills Training but had not participated. These offenders did not differ from the program participants on a number of characteristics and were followed for a comparable period. However, the return rate of 35.7% for the comparison group was higher than the return rate for the program participants.

Given the high risk nature of the offenders who are selected for Cognitive Skills Training, the observed recidivism rate of 26.3% for program participants appears to be low. For example, based

on pre-treatment information using our recidivism prediction devise (SIR), we predicted that 46% of the offenders would recidivate within one year following release.

Although we must view our outcome figures as tentative until we have data for a larger number of offenders and a longer follow-up period, our early results present encouraging evidence regarding the program's impact on recidivism. Future research will examine the relationship between post-release recidivism and the specific cognitive skills gains that offenders make during their participation in the program. Our research efforts will also be aimed at identifying the types of offenders who benefit most from Cognitive Skills Training.

## **FUTURE PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT**

Within the Correctional Service of Canada, the Cognitive Skills Training Program is now a fundamental component of a broader Living Skills strategy for the personal development of offenders. The Living Skills strategy, outlined in Figure 3, consists of a series of interrelated, yet distinct program components. Each component addresses specific needs areas which have been highlighted quite consistently in the research literature as contributing to or maintaining criminal behaviour (Andrews, 1989). We believe these needs areas should be targeted in the process of preparation for release.

Drawing from the success of the Cognitive Skills Training program, the Correctional Service of Canada is committed to developing and implementing all Living Skills program components

across our facilities. This will occur over the next three years. The goal is to ensure that each of the program components are available at the appropriate time during the offender's sentence, so as to meet those needs which are most prominent and relevant in the process of preparing offenders for reintegration.

The Correctional Service of Canada recently adopted a Mission which clearly outlines the direction in which the Service will move. The Mission Document includes a Mission Statement which specifies the business we are in, outlines our basic ideals with a set of five core values, offers guiding principles or key assumptions which serve to direct our actions, and specifies strategic objectives essential to ultimately achieving our Mission in the longterm.

The pilot implementation of the Cognitive Skills Training program speaks to the core of our Mission – to actively encourage and assist offenders in becoming law-abiding citizens. The program fulfills this task by providing the means for offenders to acquire the skills and abilities required for pro-social adaptation.

In so doing, we respect Core Value 2 which states: "we shall recognize that the offender has the potential to live as a law-abiding citizen". Furthermore, by having Correctional Service of Canada staff provide the program to offenders, and through general staff awareness training, we reinforce our belief in Core Value 3: "that our strength and our major resource in achieving our objectives is our staff, and that control can be assured through positive interaction between staff and offenders".

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**ELIZABETH FABIANO** is the Acting Senior Officer, Personal Development in the Education and Personal Development division of the Correctional Service of Canada. She is responsible for the development and implementation of the Living Skills programming strategy, and is the national trainer for the Cognitive Skills Training program. Elizabeth is a graduate of Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario (Honours Sociology) and the University of Ottawa (Masters in Applied Criminology). She has co-authored many monographs in the areas of cognitive assessment, cognitive intervention, and correctional services for female offenders. She is also the co-author of Time to Think: A Cognitive Model of Delinquency Prevention and Offender Rehabilitation (with R. Ross), Institute of Social Sciences and Arts, Inc., 1985.

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Figure 1  
Percentage of Offenders Who Felt They  
Improved in Eight Areas of Functioning

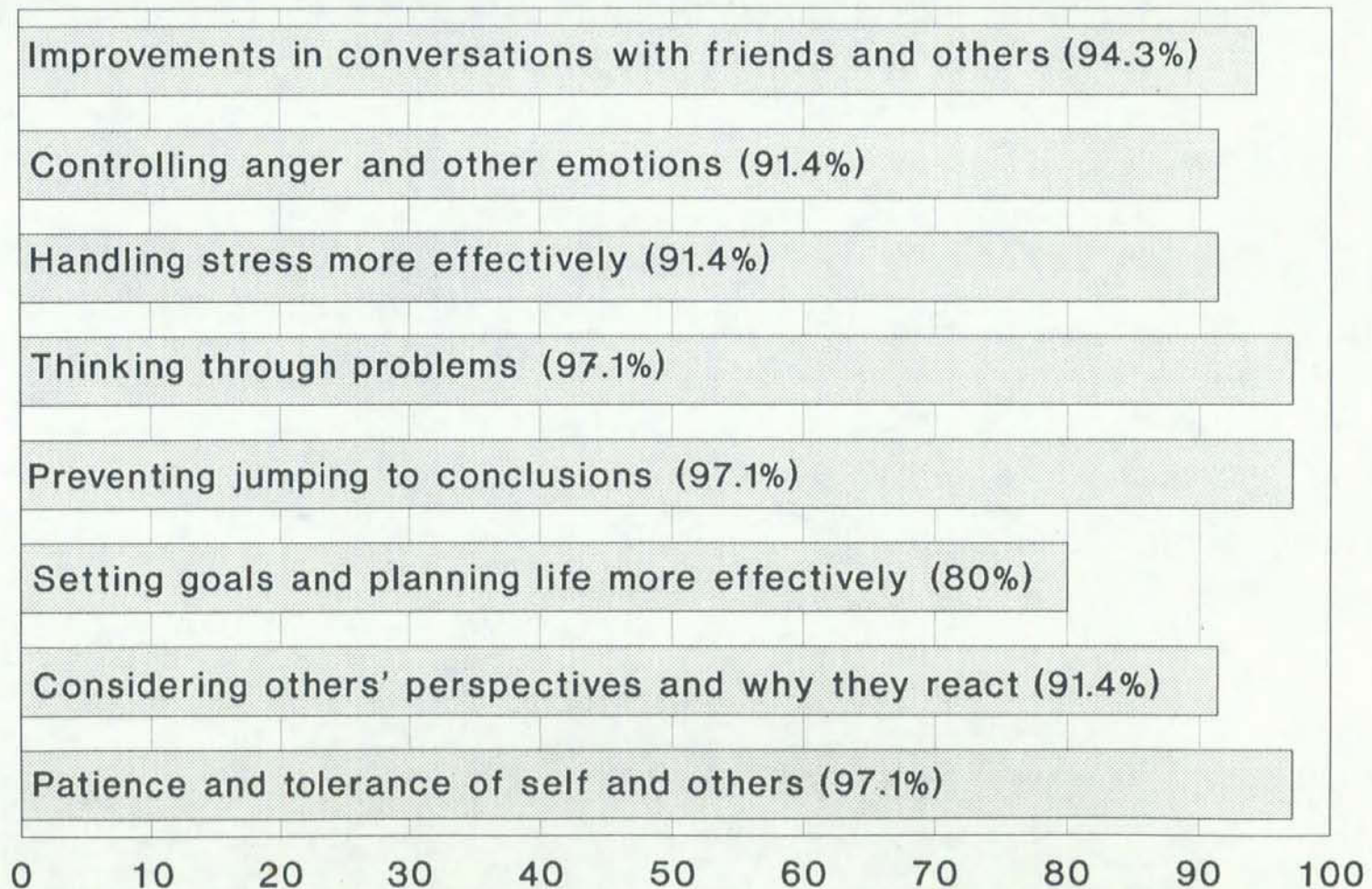


Figure 2  
Percentage of Cases Falling Within  
Each Risk Group

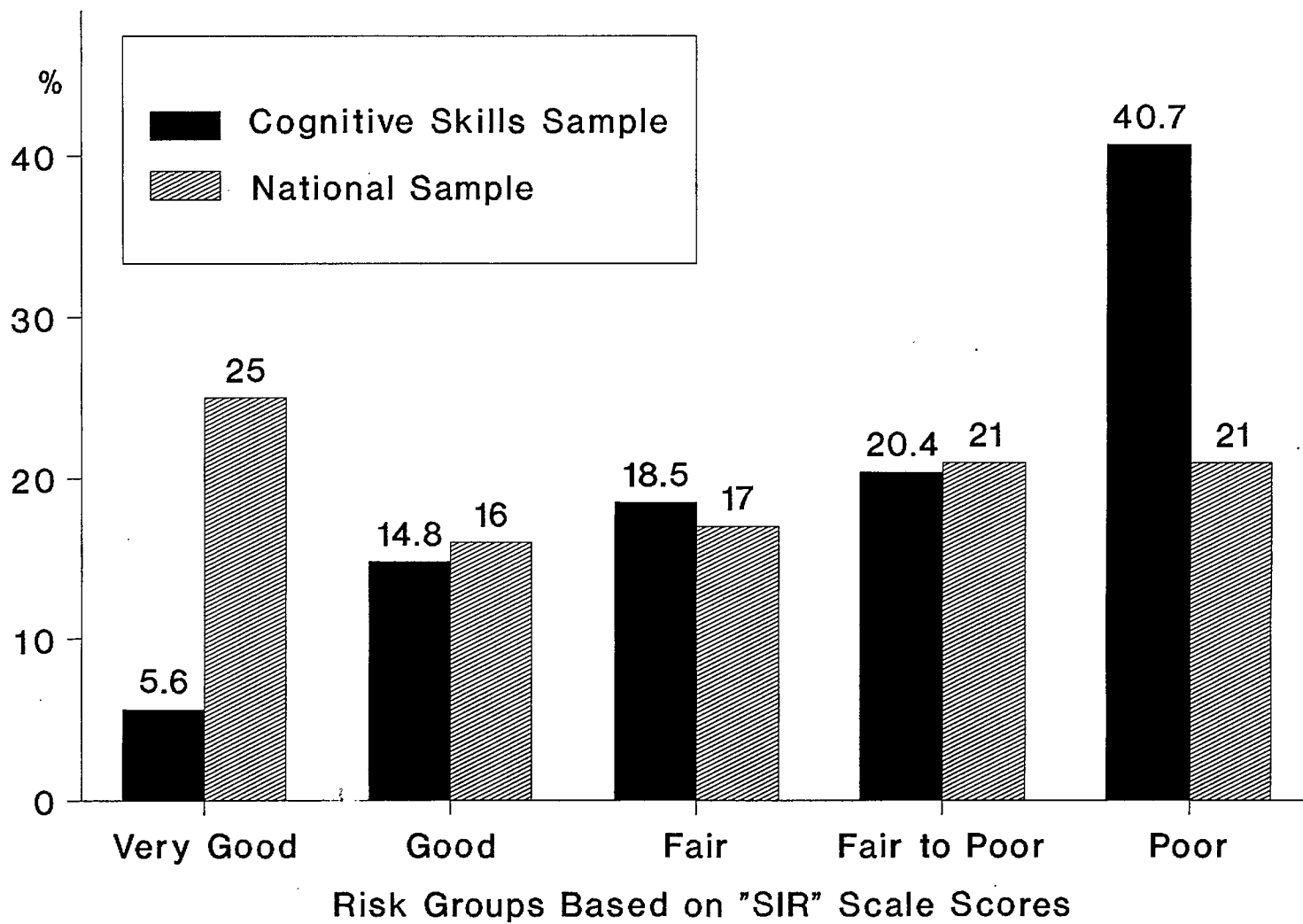
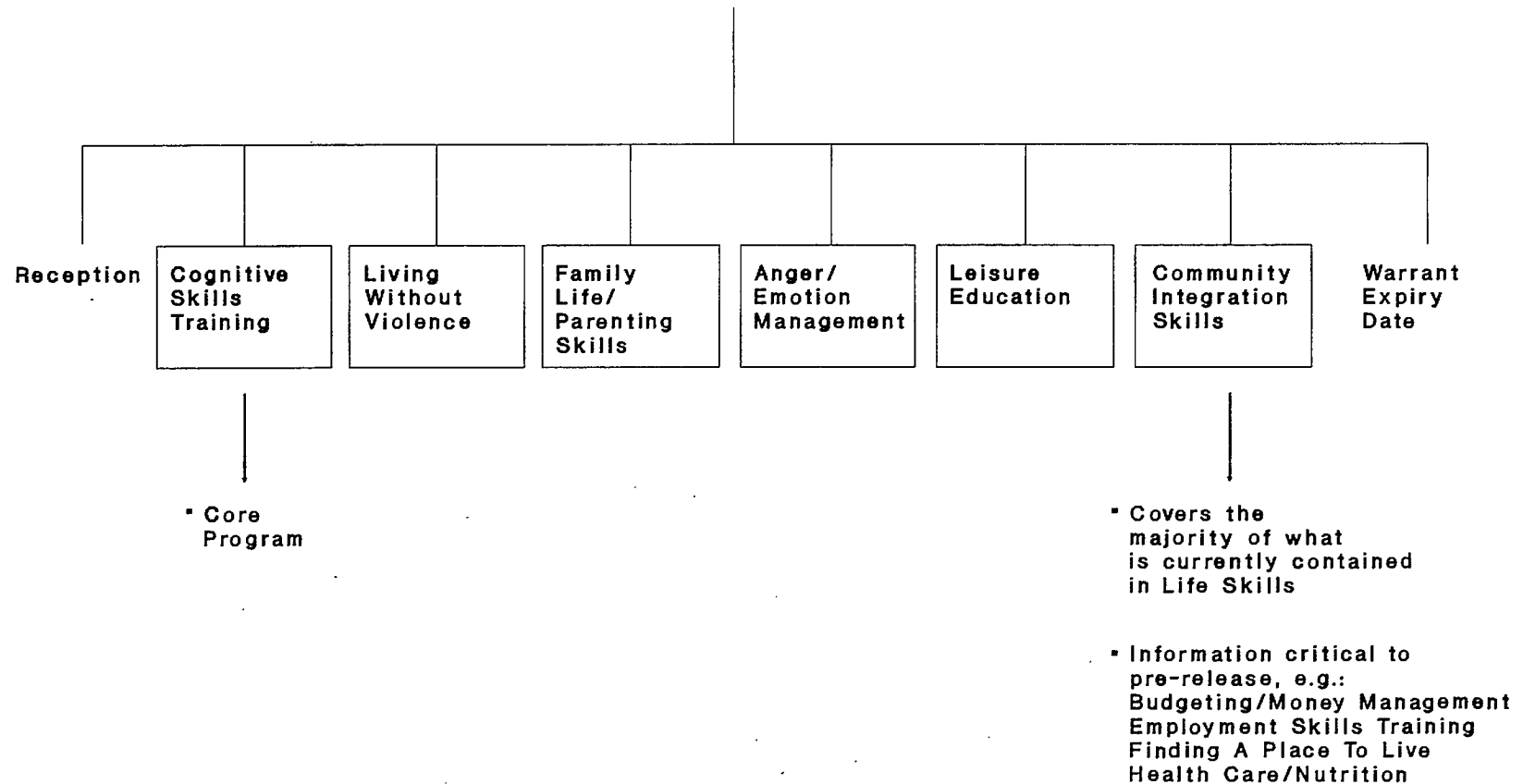


Figure 3

## Living Skills Programming Within The Correctional Service Of Canada





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