

Virtual decisions – virtual reality (VR) workshop for children at risk of criminal exploitation

A virtual reality (VR) workshop to support children and young people who are at risk of criminal exploitation by increasing awareness of knife crime, gang culture, and decision-making.

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Key details

Does it work?	Untested – new or innovative
Focus	Diversion Prevention Reoffending
Topic	Anti-social behaviour Violence (other) Vulnerability and safeguarding
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Region	North East

Key details

Partners	Police Community safety partnership Criminal justice (includes prisons, probation services) Education Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	April 2024
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Children and young people Communities Victims

Aim

The aim of Virtual Decisions is to:

- educate children aged 10 to 14 years on gang culture and knife crime
- engage with young people using virtual reality (VR) to explore decision-making
- empower young people to make informed decisions to ensure a safer and more inclusive community

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of Virtual Decisions are to:

- reduce the rates of youth crime, youth violence, and child criminal exploitation
- improve young people's knowledge on the risk of becoming involved in criminal activities
- improve young people's understanding of options to safely resolve conflict

- improve young people's understanding of how they can support each other to safely resolve conflict

Description

West Yorkshire violence reduction unit (VRU) conducted research which revealed that VR can engage children and young people to improve learning outcomes. In April 2024, the VRU collaborated with West Yorkshire Police to launch a VR educational programme which aims to support children and young people who are at risk of criminal exploitation.

The development of the VR was outsourced to a training provider, Virtual Decisions, who used child psychologists and the experiences of over 1,300 children to build a 'choose your own path' experience. The 'choose your own path' format provides over 3,000 different choices for users. Participants can experience the consequences of their decisions using virtual reality headsets, without real-world repercussions.

The virtual reality experience aims to promote awareness, empathy, and critical thinking.

VR workshops

Following the development of the programme, the force's training facilitators received in-person training on how to use the VR. The VRU manages bookings of the headsets with a single point of contact identified in each region.

During the session, workshop facilitators will expose participants to VR scenarios. They will teach users through a 'main' character in the scenarios, drawing on professional experience and a teaching guide. Participants are then encouraged to discuss options and decisions that the 'viewer' makes during the immersion in VR. Towards the end of the workshop, users reflect on their personal journey and share their learning with others.

The workshops can be tailored to a primary audience (years 5 and 6), a secondary audience (years 7 to 11), and to young people in the criminal justice system. Parents, carers and professionals can also request to take part in workshops.

Facilitators have been provided with additional materials to continue to support young people and ensure the longevity of the project.

The development and the roll out of Virtual Decisions cost £80,000, funded by West Yorkshire Police.

Overall impact

Delivery

- The programme has been delivered in several settings since 2024, by West Yorkshire Police, the Youth Justice Service, and community organisations. To date, there have been 3,180 bookings.
- Virtual Decisions has reached approximately 2,173 children during the first year of delivery.

Impact

- A survey was conducted with children who had attended the workshop. There was a 125% increase in self-reported understanding of gangs.
- There was a 157% increase in self-reported understanding of knife crime.
- A recent Ofsted inspection of a local college reported that “students shared their appreciation for the opportunity to engage in the VR headset workshops and the positive impact it had on their understanding of the risks around knife crime.”

Participant feedback

- "Gaining an understanding of how my decision could have lifelong implications for myself and others."
- "It shows you the impacts and consequences of carrying something that could potentially harm you or someone you may or may not know."
- "A lot of innocent people carry knives to protect themselves, but it can be used in the wrong way."
- "The people you choose to hang out with can dramatically impact your life. Avoid negative influences."
- "Carrying a knife is more dangerous for people who are carrying it."
- "Don't get involved. Peer pressure is a big influence."

Facilitator feedback

- Facilitators have reported that Virtual Decisions is having a high impact on children in several different areas, especially in improving awareness of the topics and increasing their knowledge.

- “The discussions and the workshop after are some of the most valuable open conversations I’ve had with these young people, it opens up conversations in a really disarming way.”
- “They are quiet at the start of the session and then really get into it and engage well, this generates a lot of questions and ‘lived experience’ discussions.”
- “The VR headset is a vital part of engagement; it gives us something real that’s been experienced which we can then discuss and pick apart – that’s some real learning.”
- “The follow up materials are excellent and hit home.”

Learning

- The Virtual Decisions content needs to be regularly reviewed to ensure slang and children’s language is incorporated.
- A commitment is needed from facilitators to ensure monitoring data is collected and shared with the VRU to enable the full understanding of the reach of the workshops.
- The VRU will be commissioning a single delivery provider to increase reach across the region, ensuring that delivery is sustained outside of limitations such as school holidays.
- Facilitators would value the production of new topics impacting children including, drugs, social media, peer pressure, healthy relationships, bullying, cyber bullying, internet safety, and mental health.

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