

- **Control.** Delinquency may result when life circumstances weaken the attachment a child has to family, peers, school, and society. Because their bonds to these institutions are severed, some adolescents feel free to exercise antisocial behavior. This view assumes that people are born bad and then must be taught to control themselves through the efforts of parents and teachers.
- **Labeling.** Some kids are considered to be winners; they are admired and envied. Others are labeled as troublemakers, losers, or punks. They are stigmatized and find themselves locked out of conventional society and into a deviant or delinquent way of life. This view holds that kids are born neither bad nor good, but become what they are through the reactions of others.

Each of these views is discussed in the following sections.

Social Learning Theories

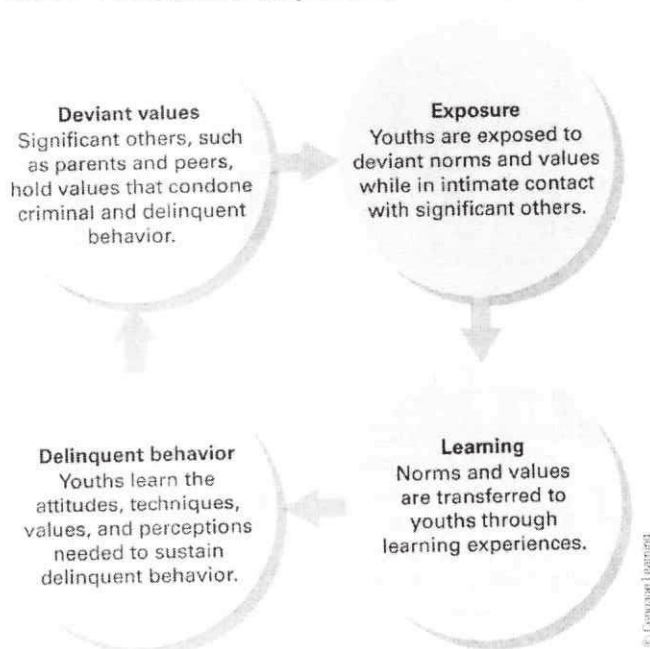
Social learning theories hold that children living in even the most deteriorated areas can resist inducements to crime if they have learned proper values and behaviors. Delinquency, by contrast, develops by learning the values and behaviors associated with criminal activity.¹²³ Kids can learn deviant values from their parents, relatives, or peers. Social learning can involve the techniques of crime (how to hot-wire a car) as well as the psychological aspects (how to deal with guilt). The former are needed to commit crimes, whereas the latter are required to cope with the emotional turmoil that follows.

The best-known social learning theory is Edwin Sutherland's **differential association theory**.¹²⁴ Sutherland believed that as children are socialized, they are exposed to and learn prosocial and antisocial attitudes and behavior from friends, relatives, parents, and so on. A prodelinquency definition might be "don't get mad, get even" or "only suckers work for a living" (see Figure 4.4). Simply put, if the prodelinquency definitions they have learned outweigh the conventional ones, an adolescent will engage in antisocial behaviors.¹²⁵ The prodelinquency definitions will be particularly influential if they come from significant others, such as parents or peers, and are frequent and intense. Some kids may meet and associate with criminal "mentors," who teach them how to be successful criminals and gain the greatest benefits from their criminal activities.¹²⁶ In contrast, if a child is constantly told by her parents to be honest and never harm others, and is brought up in environment in which people "practice what they preach," then she will have learned the necessary attitudes and behaviors to allow her to avoid environmental inducements to delinquency.

While it is difficult to test the principles of differential association, there are indications that the theory has validity. Criminal careers appear to be intergenerational: adolescents whose parents are deviant and criminal are more likely to become criminals themselves and eventually to produce criminal children. The more time kids are exposed to, learn from, and are involved with criminal parents, the more likely they are to commit crime themselves.¹²⁷

Kids are more likely to engage in antisocial or deviant behavior when the attitudes that support it are reinforced by peers and friends.¹²⁸ They learn a lot from their boyfriends or girlfriends, and those who find law-abiding romantic partners are less likely to develop antisocial attitudes and behaviors.¹²⁹ In contrast, adolescents are more likely to embrace deviant values if they are shared by close friends or associates.¹³⁰ Learning deviant values may also involve a cognitive shift: exposure

Figure 4.4 Social Learning Theory of Delinquency



SOCIAL LEARNING THEORIES

Posit that delinquency is learned through close relationships with others; children are born good and learn to be bad from others.

DIFFERENTIAL ASSOCIATION THEORY

Asserts that criminal behavior is learned primarily in interpersonal groups and that youths will become delinquent if definitions they learn in those groups that are favorable to violating the law exceed definitions favorable to obeying the law.

Looking Back to Jay's Story

Jay was helped by supportive service agencies who worked closely with him and his foster parents.

CRITICAL THINKING Design a community service program that would help someone like Jay adjust to more conventional behavior patterns.

to delinquency-reinforcing cues in the environment forces teens to rethink their attitudes and values, perhaps developing a more cynical and detached view of life.

Social Control Theories

Social control theories, the second main branch of the social process approach, suggest that the cause of delinquency resides in the strength of the relationships a child forms with conventional individuals and groups. Those who are socialized to have close relationships with their parents, friends, and teachers will develop a positive self-image and the ability to resist the lure of deviant behaviors. They develop a strong commitment to conformity that enables them to resist pressures to violate the law. If, however, their bonds to society become fractured or broken, youths will feel free to violate the law because they are not worried about jeopardizing their social relationships (see Figure 4.5).

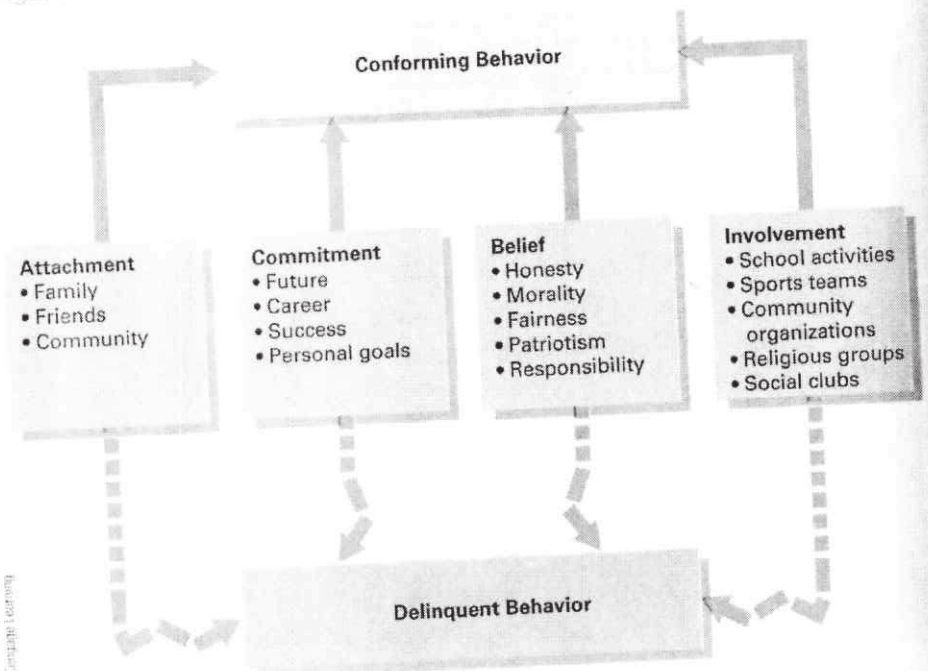
The most prominent control theory is the one developed by sociologist Travis Hirschi.¹³¹ In his classic book *Causes of Delinquency*, Hirschi set out the following arguments:

- All people have the potential to commit crimes because they are pleasurable and immediately gratifying: money without work; sex without courtship; revenge without process.
- People are kept in check by their social bonds or attachments to society.
- If these social bonds are weakened, kids are able to engage in antisocial but personally desirable behaviors.

Hirschi argues that the **social bond** a person maintains with society contains four main elements:

- *Attachment* to parents, peers, and schools
- *Commitment* to the pursuit of conventional activities, such as getting an education and saving for the future

Figure 4.5 Elements of the Social Bond



SOCIAL CONTROL

THEORIES Posit that delinquency results from a weakened commitment to the major social institutions (family, peers, and school); lack of such commitment allows youths to exercise antisocial behavioral choices.

SOCIAL BOND Ties a person to the institutions and processes of society; elements of the bond include attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief.