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Psychological Maturity, Discernment, and Juvenile Offending: A Forensic Psychology Perspective on Criminal Responsibility and Social Reintegration

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Abstract

Juvenile offending raises complex questions concerning the relationship between psychological development, discernment, criminal responsibility, and prospects for social reintegration. Adolescence is characterized by ongoing cognitive, emotional, and psychosocial maturation, which may influence decision-making, impulse control, risk perception, and susceptibility to peer pressure.

This study examines the relevance of psychological maturity and discernment to juvenile offending and explores the contribution of forensic psychological assessment to legally informed, developmentally appropriate responses within European juvenile justice systems.

A qualitative, interdisciplinary approach is proposed, combining a narrative review of research in developmental and forensic psychology with doctrinal consideration of juvenile justice principles and European child protection standards. The analysis focuses on executive functioning, emotional regulation, moral reasoning, contextual vulnerability, and the distinction between psychological assessment and judicial determinations of responsibility.

Developmental differences may affect how minors understand consequences, regulate behavior, and respond to social influences. However, chronological age alone cannot adequately capture individual variability, and psychological immaturity does not automatically negate criminal responsibility. Forensic assessment can provide contextualized evidence concerning cognitive capacities, psychosocial functioning, and intervention needs, while respecting methodological limitations and the court's decision-making authority. Rehabilitation-oriented responses may benefit from individualized educational, family-based, and psychosocial support.

Integrating developmental evidence into juvenile justice can support proportionate decisions, procedural safeguards, and interventions oriented toward reintegration. Further comparative and empirical research

is needed to clarify assessment practices and evaluate their contribution to fair outcomes and reduced reoffending across diverse European legal contexts, while respecting the best interests and fundamental rights of children.

Keywords: Psychological Maturity; Discernment; Juvenile Offending; Forensic Psychology; Criminal Responsibility; Juvenile Justice; Social Reintegration