

Playbook: Law Enforcement & Justice System

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Adults working in law enforcement and justice system roles (e.g. community police, school resource officers, youth corrections and probation staff) are uniquely positioned to both protect public safety and promote the well-being of their community. Professionals in these roles can bridge these duties by serving as trusted adults, helping shape positive youth development in both everyday interactions as well as moments of stress, crisis, or consequence.

Creating environments where youth interact with law enforcement and justice system professionals works best when we use developmentally- and trauma-informed approaches. While a full review of these approaches extends beyond the scope of this Playbook, we offer key ideas to help you get started.

1. Build trust with youth.

- Strengthen connection and build trust through regular, friendly interactions. Greet youth by name and follow up on past conversations.
- Show you are an available source of support by engaging youth in places they gather (e.g., school and community events, graduation ceremonies, cafeteria).
- Accept invitations to speak to youth about topics unique to your role (e.g., career path, safety tips, conflict resolution strategies).
- Where relevant, invite youth to help shape safety expectations in their environment (e.g., within classrooms, group therapy rooms).
- Be fully present during times of stress for youth and attempt to follow-up later and check in on how they are doing. This can offer the stability and care they may need.
- Keep your word as often as possible to cultivate the belief that "I matter.", and if you cannot, follow-up with them and let them know the reason why.
- If applicable, create a welcoming office environment (e.g., open door, youth artwork, positive messaging, fidget items) that feels accessible, safe, and supportive.

2. Model nonjudgment, fairness, and dignity in every interaction.

- When a youth makes a poor choice, show care and nonjudgment by seeking to understand what need they are trying to get met, and the context informing their decision.
- Acknowledge discomfort certain activities, such as discipline, monitoring, or searches, may cause. Foster respect by describing what you are doing and why and checking in to address concerns.
- Ask about strengths and connect youth with meaningful service opportunities that showcase those skills (e.g., art projects, vocational activities, mentoring younger kids).
- When appropriate, communicate at eye level to foster respect and connection.
- Lead by example, inspiring through authenticity rather than authority.

1. Use accountability conversations to build core beliefs and mitigate shame.

- Maintain a calm, deliberate tempo in your language and behavior to help youth fully understand what is being said.
- Let youth choose the time and setting for difficult conversations when appropriate.
- Recognize strengths before addressing harm, framing accountability as a form of agency.
- After a violation, explore their thought process, discuss impact on themselves and others, and invite them to propose a solution.
- When addressing minor issues, explain the issue clearly, listen fully, and affirm their value regardless of the decision they made.
- Use check-ins to affirm worth and cultivate the belief "I matter.", not to monitor behavior.

"How are you doing on the goals you set for yourself? What seems to be the hardest part right now?"

"We can write this as a violation, or you can take a corrective step by enrolling in the workshop. I personally believe in you, which is why I'd encourage you take the path toward growing through this. Which works best for you?"

"You are more than this choice. Here's why this matters, and here's how we can move forward."

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Have conversations, cont.

2. Normalize active listening and overcoming hard things.

- Be fully present, maintain eye contact, and show respect for what youth are experiencing.
- Share stories of youth resilience to inspire hope and growth.
- Remind them of the last time they overcame hard things.
- Pause and listen during emotionally charged moments, asking how they feel.
- Affirm strong emotions as valid and emphasize support over punishment.
- Acknowledge emotional regulation and decision-making are continuing to develop throughout adolescence and into adulthood.
- Model humility and self-regulation, showing that adults also work on emotional control.

"Way to go! You've completed two steps already – that proves you can handle tough things. Let's plan your next one. What do you think you need to get through this?"

"Let's both take a few deep breaths before we talk. It helps me think more clearly, and maybe it could do the same for you."

3. Reinforce hope and future orientation.

- Model and share your own moral values. Share why you got into law enforcement or justice system work and encourage them to talk about their own values and goals.
- Help youth write down a short-term personal goal (like finishing a program or applying for a job), revisit it at each encounter with them, and celebrate progress.
- Celebrate as many small successes as possible for a youth, even if that means celebrating a day, or a week without a write-up. This will foster competence, self-efficacy, and hope.
- End interactions with affirmation and connection.

"Even though you broke the rule, you still matter to this community. I hope to see you again this week."

"I'll check back tomorrow to see how you're doing. You're not on your own in this."

"There are many people in your corner, including me."

Promote growth.

1. Turn consequences into opportunities for growth, reflection, and repair.

- Frame challenges as growth opportunities. Discuss their sources of support and strength, and help them make a plan to lean on those assets.
- Model supportive behavior during tough times and help youth connect with resources they choose. Activate their agency by having them take the lead in selecting and/or engaging these resources.
- Introduce youth to mentors or programs, and follow up on their experience.
- Involve families in goal-setting or connect youth with ongoing community support.
- Use restorative conversations after incidents (e.g., shoplifting) to reflect on impact and choices.
- Include restorative practices like peer mediation or service projects in responses to violations.

2. Help youth practice coping, decision-making, and problem-solving abilities in real time.

- Check in after a difficult moment. Listen, and offer support and validation.
- Acknowledge youth efforts, even small ones, to let them know they are seen and cared for.
- Teach and model stress resets like deep breathing. Allow youth time to self-regulate before engaging or responding.
- Invite youth to name and explore their emotions, using open-ended questions and empathetic listening to build trust. Supporting youth in naming their emotions and how to respond builds their ability to manage their feelings.
- When speaking and engaging with a youth that is angry, normalize their feeling and share that anger is often the outward expression of another internal emotion.
- Role-play common stress scenarios and let youth try different responses, reinforcing that they can handle making healthy choices in challenging situations.

"I know that situation was hard. How are you doing now?"

"I saw you take a deep breath and try again. That took a lot of strength. How did that work for you?"