

Police-Youth Dialogues Can Build Trust, Relationships

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PROGRAM STRATEGIES



A group of teenagers wearing hooded sweatshirts walks through a cluster of Philadelphia police officers. You might expect tensions to arise on both sides. But in this particular instance, the scenario is being staged at the Philadelphia Police Academy—and the cadets and young people have switched places to explore how they can better understand each others' point of view.

Philadelphia's aspiring police officers have taken part in these roleplaying activities since 2009 as part of an open dialogue designed to improve relations with the community's young people.

"Even though it's staged, it's amazing. There's still a lot of emotional content that grows out of that interaction" as young people and cadets walk in each others' shoes, says George D. Mosee, Jr., deputy district attorney for the Juvenile Division in the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office.

Efforts to whittle away the mistrust sometimes felt between officers and young people are underway in other cities and towns, too. Linda Baird, associate director of youth justice programs at the [Center for Court Innovation](#) in New York, organized her first police-youth dialogue in 2012, at the request of high school students serving on the center's Youth Justice Board. Those young people met with retired New York police officers to talk about their respective experiences and [captured the conversation on film](#).

Since then, Baird has met with six sites across the country, including Philadelphia, to see what they've learned launching similar dialogues.

Sharing Points of View

The Philadelphia roleplaying scenario, for example, opens the door for youth to talk about the positive and negative aspects of their daily interactions with police. And cadets are able to share the safety concerns that arise when they can't see a young person's face or hands. Another site has found that playing a 911 call helps youth understand how few details police may have when looking for a suspect. And police from the sites have said they better understand young people's frustrations after hearing from teens who have been repeatedly questioned by officers despite doing nothing wrong.

“[A dialogue] gives young people tools to understand where police are coming from and why sometimes they might be stopped in a way that feels to them like they’re not being fully respected,” Baird says. “But it also reminds police that young people they are stopping are just, more than 90 percent of the time, kids going about their day.”

Five Tips for Spearheading Police-Teen Dialogues

Family- and youth-serving agencies can bring together their community’s police and youth to help them gain mutual respect and improve their daily interactions. The Center for Court Innovation, with support from the Department of Justice’s [Office of Community Oriented Policing Services](#), plans to release a toolkit later this year. (We’ll share it then.)

In the meantime, Baird and Mosee share their tips for launching productive dialogues:

1. **Find the right champions.** One of the most important steps is bringing on community stakeholders who understand both perspectives, Baird says. Assess whether yours is the right agency to make the initial contact with local police or to facilitate the conversation once an event is scheduled.
2. **Do your homework.** Baird says it’s a good idea to talk to youth before the dialogue starts to get a sense of their questions. You’ll also want to notify police beforehand about the type of information they’ll need to address. Also, keep in mind that youth may have had past experiences with law enforcement and the justice system. At one of the sites Baird visited, a young woman didn’t want to bring up the fact that her sister had been arrested in the past. You’ll want to address such concerns in advance.
3. **Consider the logistics.** Mosee invites an equal number of youth and cadets to events and asks them to sit next to each other to encourage mingling. Providing lunch also allows participants to get to know each other more personally and to discover things they have in common, such as growing up in the same neighborhood.
4. **Set the tone, but allow the conversation to flow.** Establish certain ground rules before each conversation, Mosee says. Give everyone a chance to speak and prohibit physical contact during role playing activities. You can’t control every situation, though, so remember that not all surprises are bad. Mosee gives the example of a youth whose mother’s home had been damaged after police erroneously searched it. One of the police attendees realized he had been there that evening, Mosee said, and apologized to the young person in front of the group.
5. **Give participants practical tools for diffusing tense situations.** Sharing points of view is a major benefit of police-youth dialogues, but you’ll also want both parties to walk away with strategies for ensuring good relations every day. For examples, young drivers who get pulled over at night can turn their dome lights on to make their hands more visible, Mosee says, and alert the officer before reaching into a glove compartment for identification. Facilitators can also encourage police to explain to youth why they’ve stopped them—once the officers have determined they are not at-risk. “That explanation can go a long way toward resolving any animosity that would’ve arisen out of the stop,” Mosee says.