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Training Law Enforcement on How to Police the Teen Brain: Improving Police-Youth Interactions

BY LISA H. THURAU

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In communities across America, police are the first responders to the vast majority of issues involving youth, whether it be disruptions at school, domestic violence at home, or schoolyard fights. Yet, police receive little information about how to use the voluminous research and best practices generated by neuroscience, psychology, and criminal justice in their work with youth.

American police are ill prepared to work with children and youth. The International Association of Chiefs of Police surveyed police chiefs and found in-service courses for officers had not been provided in the past five years. Strategies for Youth Inc. (SFY) recently examined how officers are equipped in the academy. In a February 2013 SFY report, If Not Now, When? A Survey of Juvenile Justice Training in Police Academies, the researchers showed that less than 1 percent of academy time was spent on juvenile justice and the vast majority of the curricula spent no time on juvenile development or the federal requirement to reduce disproportionate minority contact.

While juvenile justice system stakeholders—juvenile defenders, prosecutors, judges, and probation officers—are increasingly trained in how teens’ uneven brain development explains their poor judgment and reduced competence and capacity, police are not. Information about what features of the teen brain lead so many youth to push limits and defy authority is glaringly missing from police recruit academy curricula. SFY decided to change that, to bring new research to police in practical lessons and applied strategies to improve their interactions with youth.

Police who deal with the nation’s children and youth, often in extreme situations—domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, witnessing community violence, and becoming victims, and victimizers—do not receive adequate training to help the youth they encounter. Remarkably, SFY has yet to find officers trained to recognize and respond to youth suffering from trauma. Too often, officers have one tool—arrest—for situations that could be resolved with an approach that digs deeper and builds on officers’ inherent authority and use of community-based services instead of the juvenile justice system.

The need for improving the access of police as gatekeepers to the juvenile justice system is evidenced by several disturbing trends:

1. Police are increasingly arresting youth for minor offenses. Since 1985, the number of juvenile arrests for public disorder offenses has increased 109 percent.¹
2. Police are more likely to use force with youth, especially youth of color. While 16 to 19 year olds represent only 7.5 percent of police contacts, they make up 30.1 percent of contacts involving force, with police initiating the use of force in 80 percent of those incidents.²
3. Youth of color are more likely to be held in detention facilities, even as the use of detention has decreased. This trend is particularly disturbing given the many studies that document the higher levels of recidivism for detained youth.³

As gatekeepers of the juvenile justice system, police should understand teens’ problems, something that is key to deciding who shouldn’t be in the system in the first place and redirecting “frequent flyers” to services that get at the root of their behavior, instead of to a system that cannot.

SFY’s Developmental Competence Approach

SFY’s mission is to promote a youth development approach to law enforcement officers and expand age-appropriate interventions for youth, equipping officers with the tools they need to expand their options and interact effectively. SFY’s Policing the Teen Brain training is premised on educating officers on the effects of nature and nurture on teens and the adults who work with them. To support this view, SFY came up with the term developmental competence to describe what every officer and department should know when working with children and youth.

Each two-day training program begins with nature, or the physiological basis of brain development and its impact on teens’ psyche and behavior. This part of the training is provided by a psychologist or psychiatrist with experience working with youth in settings police encounter, including street, family, and school scenarios. The second training day focuses on nurture, including cultural and demographic factors that affect youth perceptions of options, as well as the legal context in which these decisions and behaviors occur. In addition to presenting the training, SFY has begun to train officers to present this part of the training to their peers.

Training Day 1: Nature

On the first day of the training, officers learn about
• Normative developmental behavior
• Recognizing and responding effectively to youth with mental health issues
• The physical, psychic, and behavioral impacts of chronic exposure to trauma on children and youth, as well as hostility attribution, hypervigilance, and defensive responses.

Each training component incorporates cutting-edge research on the teen brain, from Deborah Yurgelun-Todd, who first discovered how different parts of the brain light up when youth see certain stimuli, to Jay Giedd’s National Institute of Mental Health replication of Yurgelun-Todd’s first study, and the work of Lawrence Steinberg at Temple University, who has conducted experiments showing how peer influence affects different parts of the teen brain as a function of age. Each training component makes use of visual aids and metaphors to demonstrate these changes—from pruning to myelination to the harsh consequences of chronic release of cortisol because of stress—in a manner that promotes officers’ memory of these processes and explanations of youth conduct.

To apply best practices for responding to these behaviors, officers learn the Policing the Teen Brain mnemonic device: behavior, language, timing (BLT). This device aims to both decipher youth behaviors and help officers consider how to conduct themselves to avoid escalation of conflict. This device is also useful to school resource officers who apply it in their work with youth in school settings, as well as to patrol officers who interact with youth every day.

At the end of the first training day, officers also observe youth responding to officers’ role-playing authoritarian and authoritative approaches in a series of skits in which all actors are asked to improvise. The psychologist or psychiatrist points out how teens’ perceptions and responses align with what science shows is typical for this age group. (“He was screaming at me,” when the officer was speaking in a normal tone; “He got in my face,” when the officer was still a good four feet away; and “He started yelling so I started yelling,” when the officer spoke louder). The psychiatrist also highlights which BLT factors officers used effectively to reduce conflict and promote cooperation.

Training Day 2: Nurture

On the second day of the training, officers learn about
• Demographic information of the youth and families the officers serve, as well as available prosocial youth development assets of the community
• Cultural influences on youth conduct from mass and social media, corporate advertising, and other sources, messages with which officers must compete,
• Juvenile law for law enforcement, providing officers awareness of the laws in their state, the national obligation to address disproportionate minority contact and how well their state is addressing that requirement, and recent trends in juvenile justice reform that affect officers’ reliance on historically used tools including arrest and detention
• Youth-serving community-based organizations that demonstrate the effectiveness of diversion and alternatives to arrest, as well as existing prosocial community assets that police can use proactively
• Asserting authority effectively with youth, which provides seven key factors that determine the outcome of a police and youth interaction

Each of these components is rooted in research and therefore reflects the core principles of evidence-based crime policy and translational criminology. The entire Policing the Teen Brain curriculum is about sharing information and practices to which officers should have routine access to help them anticipate and respond to the challenges of the youth they encounter, but too often do not.

For instance, demographic information indicates the various effects of poverty on youth development, youth hunger (and its effect on behavior), and family instability. Research on the victimization of children from single-parent households is linked back to the research on trauma taught the day before. In the cultural factors component, a variety of research on the role of media and corporations on the promotion of anti-authority, antisocial behaviors in youth are shared, along with how these views shape their perceptions of duty, obligations, and police authority. The Juvenile Law for Law Enforcement
section focuses as much on recent decisions as on research regarding desistance, effects of detention and incarceration, and alternatives, including restorative justice, to arrest and court.

The Impacts of the Policing the Teen Brain Training

SFY’s training, which is offered to specific departments and regionally, has led to immediate decreases in arrests in the departments. In Boston, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) Transit Police arrests declined from 646 in 1999 to 74 in 2009 and have remained under 100 since the department revoked its zero-tolerance approach and tried peer mediation and working with community partners to police hot spots. In two other Massachusetts cities, Cambridge and Everett, the juvenile arrest rate decreased by 50 percent. SFY’s training and review of the departmental standards led the Cambridge Police Department to reorganize its entire approach to policing children, youth, and family and develop a cutting-edge approach that relies on a psychologist to develop proactive solutions at the first sign of trouble.

SFY’s work with officers has yielded positive responses. A Massachusetts sergeant, who has been trained by SFY to replicate the training with recruits, introduces the training almost ruefully. He usually says, “You guys have a leg up on the rest of us. We didn’t get this in the academy, and we made a lot of mistakes with young people before we figured out which way was up.”

“The SFY team presented information that every officer working with kids, especially in schools needs to know and can use to make those interactions effective and less trouble,” Wayne Sakamoto, president of the California School Resource Officers Association, said after regional training in San Diego. “When certain teen behaviors were explained and the team showed us tactics for working with hard-to-reach kids, I heard many people around me having ‘Aha! That’s how you do it’ moments.” In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, an officer working in the city’s public schools wrote, “Being advised that the brain isn’t fully developed is what really shocked me; I now know to approach situations differently.”

Perhaps most important is how departments use this training to rethink their strategy; to realign the way internal structure responds to children, youth, and family; to recognize that the earlier the intervention, the better; and to show the increased willingness to reach out to and integrate outside resources to work proactively with youth.

“We realized we had to do more because arrests were not cutting it; if anything, they were worsening these problems,” said Chief Paul MacMillan of the MBTA Police. “That’s when we realized that there is a better way.”

Developmental competence refers to the understanding that children and adolescents’ perceptions and behaviors are influenced by biological and psychological factors related to their developmental stage. Developmental competence is based on the premise that specific, sequential stages of neurological and psychological development are universal. Children and adolescents’ responses differ from those of adults because of fundamental neurobiological factors and related developmental stages of maturation.

A person who is developmentally competent recognizes that how children and youth perceive, process, and respond to situations is a function of their developmental stage and secondarily their culture and life experience. Developmentally competent adults align their expectations, responses, and interactions, as well as those of institutions and organizations, to the developmental stage of the children and youth they serve.