

*Teaching Kids to Engage Safely with the Police*

# Juvenile Justice Jeopardy

By Kristen Wheeler

The first time I led *Juvenile Justice Jeopardy* (JJJ), an educational game designed to teach young people about the law and how to safely interact with law enforcement, a young man, no older than 16, pulled out a fake gun and shot me. Miming with his thumb cocked back and his pointer and middle fingers trained on me, the shooting wasn't real, but the emotions triggering his actions were. The room full of sheriff's deputies in Macon, Georgia froze. They had come to watch the game and now waited to see what would happen next.

I had been role-playing a law enforcement officer so the group of young JJJ players could practice strategies for staying safe during a police encounter. Bringing in my knowledge and experience as a former public defender, we'd spent the last 30 minutes going over both important rights and responsibilities in these interactions.

This young man had acted in a completely exemplary way up until that point in the role-plays. He did not escalate or take the bait as I continued to provoke and challenge him, goading him into abandoning the strategies he had been learning. Until, in a last-ditch effort to get a rise out of him, I tapped his sneaker with my shoe.

He took the bait. The young man jumped out of his chair, pulled his hand from his pocket, and yelled: "now you got to get got," and "BANG."

## Education Disguised as a Game

Strategies for Youth (SFY), a national training and policy organization

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dedicated to ensuring best outcomes for youth interacting with law enforcement, has been playing JJJ across the country since 2010. As with all of SFY's work, JJJ's goal is to keep young people out of the juvenile and criminal justice systems. JJJ educates young people on a wide array of subjects, taking the necessary first step in any prevention effort: education. It empowers them with accurate, vetted information, helps them to understand the rules of harsh systems and tough realities they are vulnerable and exposed to, and gives them opportunities to practice desistance strategies. In so doing,

seamlessly implement JJJ into their own programming and play the game with the young people who already know and trust them. The game then lives in the community, maximizing its reach through continued use.

By dividing the players into teams and introducing winnable points, the game format unlocks the competitive spirit that lives in every young person. Playing on this instinct, JJJ garners immediate buy-in from participants and then keeps them engaged and focused throughout. This increases the likelihood that the young players will retain the information and

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*I had been role-playing a law enforcement officer so the group of young players could practice strategies for staying safe during a police encounter when the young man pulled out a fake gun and shot me.*

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JJJ allows young people to make fully informed decisions and utilize prosocial skills in interactions with peers and authority figures that could otherwise place them in legal peril.

Over more than a decade, across 25 states, JJJ has expanded from the legal-focused content of its "Street Game" to the various and numerous social-emotional issues and institutional settings that create pipelines to the justice systems. From helping young people understand and manage trauma, to teaching school codes of conduct and probation contracts, to reflecting on the unique needs of youth involved in the child welfare system, JJJ uses the same interactive, game board structure to engage youth in important conversations.

SFY conducts an assessment to build customized games for each community that uses JJJ. This ensures that the game's questions and answers are legally accurate and reflect the realistic needs of youth in the area. Based on a train-the-trainer, credible messenger model, SFY then trains staff from local programs and organizations to become game leaders. This model allows organizations to

practice strategies they develop when it matters most—when they are making their own decisions in tense and potentially explosive situations involving peers, police, and other authority figures.

During gameplay, the adult game leader manages the board by posing the games' questions and multiple-choice answers to the players. The magic of the game is in the snowballing, organic conversations that then ensue, prompted by players' follow-up questions and aloud pondering, and shepherded by the game leader. Given the subject matter, which many young people experience as taboo in their daily lives, players can feel at ease asking questions and sharing their own thoughts under the guise of gameplay. This interactive format creates a two-way street of information and experience sharing between the players and game leaders, which helps develop stronger and more trusting relationships.

JJJ is only one prong in SFY's approach to improving outcomes for youth. Acknowledging that in any police-youth interaction, there is an adult in

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the equation, SFY trains law enforcement to use developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed, and equitable approaches to youth. These trainings bring in adolescent psychologists to help law enforcement understand the developing adolescent brain, the social and cultural influences and realities young people contend with, and the impact all these have on a youth's perspectives. The training promotes effective de-escalation techniques, with the hopes that arrest or use of force will be the absolute last possible option when engaging with a young member of the community.

"caregivers typically score under 50% on legal comprehension tests."<sup>1</sup>

In a 2023 study, approximately 1/5 of youth surveyed named a family member as their resource for learning information about the law and law enforcement, and approximately 2/5 named the internet.<sup>2</sup> We are relegating education on critical matters to caregivers, who themselves may not have access to or command of legally accurate information, and social media, which is rife with misinformation.

Our current societal approach is to delegate these conversations to the private realm. But, much like sex education, which was taken from the home into the schools in an acknowledgment of the public health necessity,

training, assert control by grabbing her. The young woman, ever more convinced of an assault, may respond by resisting further. The situation transforms into a one-way ratchet. An albeit unfortunate and unpleasant pat down could turn into an unnecessary slew of charges—assault and battery on a police officer, resisting arrest, disorderly conduct, etc.

Rather, by answering young people's questions about why and when a pat down can occur and helping them understand what it will look and feel like, we increase their confidence and sense of agency in these interactions. Preparing in advance, in the safety of a calm space with a trusted adult, is the right format for learning these valuable lessons. Not every child will be stopped and frisked, but we cannot rely solely on the hope that they will not. Law enforcement is present at traffic stops, mental health well-being checks, in our schools, and in any investigation of a crime. The chances are high that citizens will interact with law enforcement, if not as children, then at some point as adults. Turning 18 does not magically impart the wisdom that *JJJ* seeks to teach. This education makes interactions between law enforcement and community members safer for everyone involved.

## *When we ask, "can a male police officer pat down a girl?" most kids and parents get the answer wrong.*

### Countering Unreliable Information

**Question:** Can a male police officer pat down a girl?

- A. Yes
- B. No

By playing *JJJ* across the country, SFY has learned that most people who are asked this question—both youth and adults—do not know the correct answer.

The correct answer is: **A. Yes.**

As was pointed out by a mother in a Philadelphia after school program: "I tell my daughter the exact opposite. I tell her no man should be placing his hands on you."

Another mother in New Hampshire told us: "Every time I take my kids to the doctor they hear about 'good and bad touches.' I am worried that that important lesson can confuse kids when it comes to pat downs."

These are examples of when "The Talk" between young people and caregivers, even with the best of intentions, can go wrong. Many caregivers, especially those living in over-policed communities, speak with the young people in their lives about how to interact safely with the police. If those caregivers are not lawyers or in law enforcement, they may relay information based on their own personal understanding or experience. While a caregiver's advice is always necessary, it can be unwittingly *legally* incorrect or incomplete. According to a 2017 study,

conversations about the law and police similarly demand institutionalized and standardized attention and space. Given the increase in visibility of, and media attention to, negative police encounters, speaking with young people about these situations is more relevant and important than ever.

The negative consequences of this societal choice fall disproportionately on families of color, who are, understandably, concerned for their children's safety when interacting with law enforcement. Levels of unaddressed trauma, in both our officers and youth, make encounters between them particularly precarious. The moment for young people to learn the rules is not in the midst of one of these fast-paced, high-stakes interactions.

Take the daughter of the mother in Philadelphia. If she was asked by a male officer to turn around and raise her arms, what would she *think and do* as the officer's hands skimmed her clothing, up her leg, and across her waistband? The words of her mother echoing in her mind, she may pull away at an uncomfortable touch, and the officer may, based on his own

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca L. Fix, Adam D. Fine & Pamela A. Matson (2023): Gender and race influence youth's responses to a training on law and safe police interactions, *Justice Evaluation Journal*, at 4 DOI: 10.1080/24751979.2023.2179418, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24751979.2023.2179418>

<sup>2</sup> Fix, *et al.* at 10 (Table 5).

### Teaching and Preparing

In February of 2023, a peer reviewed study of *JJJ* was published in the *Justice Evaluation Journal* by researchers at Johns Hopkins Schools of Public Health and Medicine, as well as Arizona State University School of Criminology and Criminal Justice.<sup>3</sup>

This study was initiated, in part, because of the lack of evaluations of the few juvenile justice curricula that exist.<sup>4</sup> The study sought to answer:

1. How does participating in this JJC [Juvenile Justice Curriculum] influence adolescents' knowledge about the law?

and

2. How much do adolescents feel prepared to interact with the police?

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca L. Fix, Adam D. Fine & Pamela A. Matson (2023): Gender and race influence youth's responses to a training on law and safe police interactions, *Justice Evaluation Journal*, DOI: 10.1080/24751979.2023.2179418. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24751979.2023.2179418>

<sup>4</sup> Fix, *et al.* at 13.

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The researchers analyzed 872 pre- and post-*Jeopardy!* game surveys, distributed to players as part of every *Jeopardy!* game, and determined that “[f]indings from this study demonstrate the benefit of a juvenile justice curriculum to improve middle and high school students’ knowledge about the law as well as their reports of feeling more prepared to interact with police following the curriculum.”<sup>5</sup>

After playing a *Jeopardy!* game, when asked how much of the content was new for

### Prevention through Connection

While the game is meant to educate, a simultaneous goal is to encourage positive relationships between youth and adult mentors, embodied by the game leaders.

A Deputy Chief of Police in Omaha, NE has been using the game in the county’s youth detention center consistently for years. By showing up, week after week, and playing and teaching the center’s youth, he developed a strong connection with them. That Deputy Chief got a call last spring from the center’s staff informing

But, they are just as central to the overall mission of the games.

The sheriff’s deputies in that room in Macon took the opportunity the game handed to them. One of the quietest officers in the group approached the young man. Having also attended SFY’s police training, he paused and adjusted to a deferential and curious stance, asking the young man why he had reacted as he did. He took the seat next to the young player, and they discussed the disrespect I had shown him by tapping his shoe, what that meant to the young man, and why he felt like lethal retaliation was his next step. The officer pleaded with him to not throw away his own life over that kind of transgression.

The young man’s actions had spoken louder than any words on the game board that day in Macon. I learned something from him, much like I learn from young players every time I play the game with them. I learned the norms of this young man’s life—the value of self-autonomy, where and how respect is given and taken, and the corrective strategies at the ready. The officers in the room learned from the young man, too. They watched a zero-to-sixty reaction, and how easy it was to escalate to lethal retribution.

In a community like Macon, where murder rates were at an all-time high—averaging 1.35 murders per week in 2022—this was information that could not and should not be ignored. The game is designed to teach youth, but when played right, the adult game leaders learn too. ■

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them, “participating adolescents reported an average of 53.3%,”<sup>6</sup> and, specifically, there was a 29.1% increase in correctly knowing that a male police officer is allowed to pat down a girl.<sup>7</sup> When asked whether *Jeopardy!* prepared them to better interact with police, 84.9% stated that it did.<sup>8</sup>

him that he had been selected by the youth to be their graduation speaker.

Other game leaders report that the conversations prompted by the game snowball for days into group discussions. In one YMCA in Massachusetts, program staff and youth referenced the game’s strategies about engaging with police safely when discussing how to navigate tough situations with friends and family members weeks later.

These effects are more subtle and not as easily tracked through survey analysis.

<sup>5</sup> Fix, *et al.* at 13.

<sup>6</sup> Fix, *et al.* at 11.

<sup>7</sup> Fix, *et al.* at 6.

<sup>8</sup> Fix, *et al.* at 9 (Table 4).



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