

The Effects of Adolescent Development on Policing



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OJJDP

Why Is Adolescent Development Important to Law Enforcement?

Law enforcement's interaction with youth is an integral part of carrying out policing duties. Approximately 4 to 5 million youth ages 16-19 have face-to-face interactions with police annually¹ and in 2012, there were over a million arrests of persons under the age of 18 in the United States.² A 2009 study comparing police behavior with juvenile and adult suspects found that juveniles are significantly more likely to be arrested than adults and officers exercised greater levels of authority when juvenile suspects were considered to be disrespectful.³

Interaction with adolescents presents a unique set of challenges to law enforcement. Teenagers sometimes feel threatened by law enforcement, which can negatively impact communication between the two. To ensure that law enforcement/youth interactions result in positive outcomes, law enforcement officers need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to effectively interact with youth in any situation.

How This Guide Can Help

This brief provides an overview of adolescent brain development and its effects on law enforcement interactions with youth. Reviewing youth developmental stages and their effects on youth behavior may increase understanding of how and why teenagers think and act the way they do. This brief includes strategies for law enforcement to apply this knowledge during youth interactions, outlining important considerations for integrating this information into everyday practices, procedures, and programs.

From
the Field

"Instead of expecting these teens to think and act like adults, knowing that they are simply not at the developmental state in their growth, allows us to amend our responses and how we interact with them."

Detective Sergeant, Rockville, MD

Adolescent Brain Development

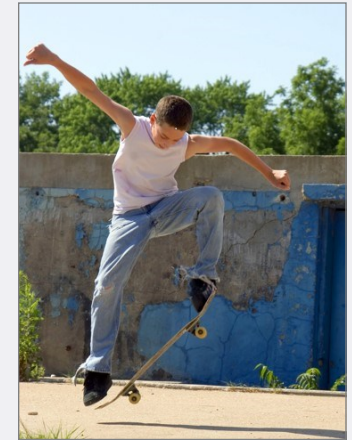
Adolescent brain development research conducted over the last 20 years shows that youth behavior and thinking may be attributed to their developmental stage. The human brain is not fully developed until the mid to late 20's including functioning that controls impulses, calms emotions, provides an understanding of the consequences of behavior, and allows for rational decision-making. The frontal lobe and the cerebellum are still developing in adolescents, causing a lack of logical reasoning. The frontal lobe is the command center for actions, problem solving, memory, impulsiveness and social behavior. The cerebellum manages information processing.⁴

The developmental stage adolescents are in can lead to a lack of mature capacity for self-regulation in emotionally charged contexts, compared to adults.⁵ This makes it much more difficult for youth to consider the consequences of their behavior, especially when faced with stressful situations such as certain types of law enforcement interaction.

The connection between adolescent brain development and behavior is an important factor to consider in juvenile justice. "Research on adolescent brain, cognitive, and psychosocial development supports the view that adolescents are fundamentally different from adults in ways that warrant their differential treatment in the justice system."⁶ Accordingly, it is important to consider that adolescents are still learning about their environment and how to react and behave in different situations.

The "Why's" of Adolescent Behavior

The part of the brain that controls rational thinking and long-term planning is not fully developed in adolescents. Youth are highly **susceptible to peer influence**; they crave **short-term rewards**; and they **do not fully grasp the potential negative consequences** of their actions. As a result, adolescents are more **prone to risky and dangerous behavior**, making them vulnerable to delinquency.



Characteristics of youth thinking and behavior may include:

- ◇ **Trouble considering consequences**
- ◇ **Confused or disorganized thinking**
- ◇ **Thinking blocked by emotions**
- ◇ **Impulsive decision-making**
- ◇ **Short-sightedness**
- ◇ **Feeling invulnerable**
- ◇ **Seeking short-term rewards and not considering long-term consequences**
- ◇ **Prioritizing thoughts differently**
- ◇ **Misinterpreting social cues**
- ◇ **Emotionally-driven decisions**
- ◇ **Different body clock (More alert in late afternoon/evening)**
- ◇ **Easily distracted**
- ◇ **Lack of long-term planning**
- ◇ **Less oriented toward the future**
- ◇ **Placing more value on present than future**

As adolescents age and their brains continue to develop, they are better able to make rational decisions and their risk of committing a crime or delinquent act lessens. Even high risk adolescent behavior is not necessarily indicative of future adult behavior. Most studies indicate that prevalence of offending peaks in the teenage years (15-19) and then declines in the early 20's.⁷ Impulsive behavior declines with age from 10 to 30 years old, and the preference for risk peaks in mid-adolescence at 16-17 years old.⁸ These patterns of behavior may be partially linked to the developmental changes that occur from adolescence to adulthood.

Fostering Positive Youth Development

Many adolescents are exposed to risk factors that increase the likelihood they will become involved in delinquent behavior, such as abuse, neglect, violent communities, or troubled families. However, there are protective factors that can help reduce potential negative effects of risk factors, and may interrupt the processes through which risk factors operate.

Some Protective Factors for Youth

- Resiliency (the ability to spring back from and successfully adapt to adversity)
- Family connectedness and parental presence
- High expectations for school performance from parents
- School connectedness/high grade point average (GPA)
- Feeling of safety in environment
- Connectedness with responsible adults
- Positive relationships and engagement with law enforcement
- Religiosity

There is a growing body of research indicating that healthy relationships with adults can facilitate positive youth development and reduce the likelihood of delinquent and anti-social behavior. Concerned adults can help adolescents maintain positive mental health by providing caring, supportive relationships, encouraging healthy behaviors, and teaching effective strategies for coping with stress.⁹ Appropriate monitoring and instruction can lead to a healthier connection and bond between adults and youth, which can protect against unhealthy peer relationships.¹⁰ Youth with adult mentors report increased belief in their ability to achieve goals and social competence as well as reductions in problem behavior.¹¹

Additionally, family connectedness is a sense of belonging and closeness to family (family as defined by the adolescent) and school connectedness refers to a positive perception of the school environment and positive interactions with people at school. Religiosity refers to youth who describe themselves as more religiously observant or affiliated with religious institutions.¹²

Law enforcement officers are in a position to positively influence youth and to ensure youth/law enforcement interactions go smoothly and produce a desirable outcome. Building healthy relationships with youth and creating a positive adult influence during interactions can foster healthy youth development. A law enforcement officer can serve as a strong protective factor to an adolescent.

From
the Field

“By developing a rapport with a juvenile and understanding differences in the juvenile mind, I am better able to obtain useful information.”

Police Officer First Class, Gretna, LA

“Teenagers are not thinking on the same level as adults. We often assume that they understand things the same way that we do, but they don’t. It is important to get on their level. It is important to understand things from their perspective, and wording is very important. You shouldn’t talk down to teenagers.”

Police Officer , Dansville, NY

10 Strategies to Improve Law Enforcement Interactions with Youth

1. Approach youth with a calm demeanor, conveying that you are there to help them. Aggression may cause the youth to shut down and make the situation worse. Refrain from pushing back (arguing). If necessary, de-escalate using a calm, focused, and non-confrontational verbal approach. Use a nonjudgmental tone. Youth are particularly attune to both verbal and non-verbal judgment from adults.

6. Repeat or paraphrase their statements. Affirm their emotions. Seek clarity and understanding through the use of these three methods. *Repeating* what they say gives you a chance to confirm you heard what they said. *Paraphrasing* shows them you are listening. *Affirming* their emotions (e.g. You're frustrated with your parents) shows them genuine interest.

2. Establish rapport. Developing rapport is fundamental to successful youth interactions. They are not likely to open up if they feel unsupported or uncomfortable. Give them your undivided attention. Convey that you want to listen and can be trusted. Listen openly and non-judgmentally.

7. Take caution with nonverbal communication. Avoid challenging gestures. Approach youth in a natural manner, not actively seeking or avoiding eye contact. Don't demand eye contact. Convey your warmth over your authority. Get on their level (e.g. sit if they are sitting), lean in when listening, and hold your arms and body in a relaxed manner.

3. Be patient. Don't act hurried, like you don't have time to talk with the youth. Give the youth a chance to ask questions and be honest with your responses. Convey that you want to hear what they have to say. Give them a chance to explain what happened. Build in extra time to assess their emotions and to work around blocked thinking due to emotion.

8. Model and praise calm confidence. Adolescents seek validation and praise while acting indifferent towards it. They act confident, even when feeling self-doubt. They tend to be most calm and cooperative when provided with adult modeling and sincere praise for their ability to make good decisions.

4. Model the respect you expect in return. Avoid criticism and lecture. Refer to them by name as much as possible. Avoid correcting them or making statements that may communicate disrespect. You may lessen their aggression and defiance by demonstrating respect and support for their autonomy, views, and choices.

9. Empower them through choices. Adolescents need to feel they have choice and control over their thoughts and actions. They are sensitive to external influence and likely to feel coerced, even when there is no explicit effort to coerce them. Yet, they rely on others to validate their decisions. Provide them a range of options and explain their choices in simple terms. Give them a chance to ask questions.

5. Use age-appropriate language. Adolescents do not have adult capacity to organize thoughts. They may not fully understand what you tell them and may need time to process information. Keep it simple. Use open-ended questions and be prepared to help them sort out information. Don't expect a long attention span.

10. Serve as a positive adult role model. Positive relationships with adults are a vital component of healthy youth development. Develop programs in your agency that focus on positive youth development, such as mentoring, job skills training, and recreational programs.

Law Enforcement Agencies Fostering Positive Youth Development

Law enforcement departments across the nation have developed successful youth programming designed to address problem behavior early on with youth, to guide them in a positive direction and reduce the likelihood they commit crimes or delinquent acts. These programs are based on the concept of behavioral modification through early intervention, allowing law enforcement to positively influence youth while their brains are still developing.

Some programs focus on prevention for youth at-risk for delinquent behavior, while others focus on diverting low-level juvenile offenders from involvement in the criminal or juvenile justice system. Law enforcement youth programs vary but most share several common goals: improving law enforcement/youth relationships; fostering positive youth development; preventing/ reducing delinquent behavior; and keeping youth out of the criminal and juvenile justice systems, where appropriate. The programs below are highlighted from the IACP's Directory of Law Enforcement Youth Programs and Services at www.theiacpyouth.org.

Frisco Juvenile Impact Program (JIP)

The Frisco, Texas Police Department's Juvenile Impact Program (JIP) intervenes with delinquent youth ages 10 to 18 who have been charged with offenses such as truancy, theft, and disorderly conduct. The program focuses on accountability and education to divert youth from the juvenile justice system and prevent further delinquent behavior. Law enforcement officers educate youth on: the negative effects they might face if they continue to participate in delinquent conduct; taking responsibility for their actions; and considering the consequences of their behavior.

Murrieta Youth Accountability Team (YAT)

The Murrieta, California Police Department's Youth Accountability Team (YAT) is a collaborative intervention program serving youth ages 12 to 17. The program targets youth at risk or involved in substance abuse, gang association, habitual truancy, and curfew violations. A team comprised of a Detective, Deputy District Attorney, Deputy Probation Officer, and a Youth Outreach Counselor work to develop an intervention strategy tailored to each individual's situation. Youth are referred to appropriate mental health and social services. The program fosters positive youth development through pro-social activities, such as mentoring, community service, field trips, and participation in a Youth Academy.

Auburn Police Pathfinder Young Adult Program

The Auburn, Indiana Police Department's Pathfinder Young Adult Program is a mentoring program for youth ages 16 to 20. The program provides instruction and information on the field of law enforcement, as well as activities to teach young adults life skills to successfully transition from high school into adulthood. The program emphasizes the importance of moral and ethical behavior, community involvement, and personal responsibility. Participants work with Auburn Police officers, local fire personnel, emergency medical technicians, and other partner agencies.

Legal Considerations in Juvenile Interview and Interrogations

Youth have a lower capacity for self-regulation in emotionally charged contexts, such as interviews or interrogations, and are more susceptible to manipulation and coercion than adults. Adolescents under the age of 18 are three times more likely to falsely confess than adults,¹³ creating a serious legal consideration for law enforcement. Law enforcement can reduce the likelihood of juvenile false confessions using a variety of age-appropriate techniques. Results of a 2013 University of Virginia study suggest conducting specialized juvenile interrogation training, limiting lengthy and manipulative techniques, and exploring alternative methods of questioning juveniles.¹⁴

Over the last 60 years, the U.S. Supreme Court has tackled numerous cases, advising law enforcement to interview children with special care. Such cases, such as *J.D.B. v. North Carolina* (2011), address developmental differences between youth and adults, transforming the legal landscape in a way that requires law enforcement to change the way they interview juvenile suspects. Additionally, several recent U.S. Supreme Court cases have abolished sentences imposing harsh punishments on youth (e.g. *Roper v. Simmons* (2005), *Miller v. Alabama* (2012)). These rulings focused on the developmental differences between youth and adults and deemed harsh sentences for youth unconstitutional based on the Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution's right against cruel and unusual punishment.

IACP Juvenile Interview/Interrogation Resources for Law Enforcement

[Reducing Risks: An Executive's Guide to Juvenile Interview and Interrogation:](#)

This resource brief highlights best practices, legal milestones, pitfalls, and techniques to reduce liability during juvenile interviews and interrogations.

<http://www.theiacp.org/reducingrisks>

[Introduction and Intermediate Juvenile Interview and Interrogation Online Training Series:](#)

These introductory and intermediate-level courses focus on best practices and procedures in juvenile interview and interrogation tactics, with a focus on age-appropriate methods for improving interactions with youth during investigations.

<http://elearning-courses.net/iacp/>

U.S. Supreme Court Cases

***Roper v. Simmons* (2005)¹⁵**

Abolished the death penalty for those under age 18 at the time of their crimes. Relying on adolescent brain research, the court explained that juveniles make "impetuous and ill-considered" decisions and are "more vulnerable or susceptible to negative influences and outside pressures" than adults. The ruling states that these same traits explain why juveniles are uniquely susceptible to the pressures of custodial interrogation.

***J.D.B. v. North Carolina* (2011)¹⁶**

Ruled that age is relevant when determining custody, influencing whether or not police should consider *Miranda*¹⁷ warnings before questioning youth, even in schools or other settings that are not at the police station. The ruling emphasized the dangers of not applying age to the custody analysis, based on the "very real differences between children and adults." The opinion states that "police officers are...competent to evaluate the effect of relative age."

***Miller v. Alabama* (2012)¹⁸**

Ruled that mandatory sentences of life without the possibility of parole are unconstitutional for all juvenile offenders, including those who have committed homicide. The opinion argued that "mandatory life without parole for a juvenile precludes consideration of his chronological age and its hallmark features—among them, immaturity, impetuosity, and failure to appreciate risks and consequences."

Resources

International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP)

The IACP is dedicated to meeting the needs of law enforcement executives, including advancement of professional police services; promotion of enhanced administrative, technical, and operational police practices; and cooperation and information sharing among police leaders across the world. For over 120 years, the IACP has been committed to “Serving the Leaders of Today, Developing the Leaders of Tomorrow.” <http://www.theiacp.org>

Improving Law Enforcement Responses to Youth Training & Technical Assistance Program

The IACP’s *Improving Law Enforcement Responses to Youth Training and Technical Assistance Program*, funded through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, strengthens law enforcement’s capacity to reduce juvenile delinquency, crime, and victimization through training and technical assistance. <http://www.theiacp.org/juvenilejustice>

Youth Focused Policing Resource Center

The IACP’s *Youth Focused Policing Resource Center* provides tools and resources including a searchable directory of youth/police programs, a resource library, and updated news and information on current issues in juvenile justice. <http://www.iacpyouth.org>

Enhancing Law Enforcement Response to Children Exposed to Violence Initiative

The IACP’s *Enhancing Law Enforcement Response to Children Exposed to Violence Initiative*, is funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. In partnership with the Yale Child Study Center, the project provides law enforcement professionals resources and tools to effectively identify and respond to children exposed to violence. <http://www.theiacp.org/Children-Exposed-to-Violence>

Law Enforcement’s Leadership Role in the Advancement of Promising Practices in Juvenile Justice

The IACP’s *Law Enforcement’s Leadership Role in the Advancement of Promising Practices in Juvenile Justice* project, funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, works to help law enforcement executives build partnerships and advance innovative approaches to address juvenile offenders in their communities.

<http://www.theiacp.org/Advancing-Juvenile-Justice-in-Law-Enforcement>

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) provides national leadership, coordination, and resources to prevent and respond to juvenile delinquency and victimization. OJJDP supports states and communities in their efforts to develop and implement effective and coordinated prevention and intervention programs and to improve the juvenile justice system so that it protects public safety, holds offenders accountable, and provides treatment and rehabilitative services tailored to the needs of juveniles and their families. <http://www.ojjdp.gov>

Adolescent Brain Development Resources

Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach:

This National Academy of Science/OJJDP report outlines recent advances in behavioral and brain research, and examines the implications of the findings for juvenile justice reform. http://sites.nationalacademies.org/DBASSE/CLAJ/Reforming_Juvenile_Justice/index.htm

Pathways to Desistance: A Developmental Approach to Juvenile Justice:

This 2012 John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation report outlines findings from the “Pathways to Desistance “ study, which follows more than 1,300 serious offenders, ages 16 to 23, for seven years to assess the paths they take out of or into crime. http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/357/Research_on_Pathways_to_Desistance_December_2012_Update.pdf

Endnotes

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