



# Ways to Engage Youth and Police in Conversation

In many communities, and particularly in communities of color, communications between youth and police officers tend to occur when a negative event is taking place in the community. These experiences can set the tone for a young person's relationship with police throughout his or her life. Taking the time to make formal and informal positive connections early on can help build long-term, meaningful trust. This document includes ideas for ways to foster positive interactions with youth in your community.

## Ways to Build Positive Interactions with Youth

- **Get involved.** Take time to get involved with activities that are geared towards young people. Youth in the community often welcome officers to join them in activities such as football, basketball, playing on the playground, bike rides, and walks.
- **Be Present.** Engage with youth when things are going well. Youth want officers to be present in good times too. While on patrol in the community, stay off your cell phone when possible. This will help youth to feel comfortable approaching and engaging with you. Young people are watching and listening more than you may think or notice. Being present helps build relationships, so youth feel more comfortable when a situation arises in the community.
- **Show Support.** Show interest and empathy when there are challenging community situations. Show your support by actively listening to what the youth have to say. Help them to understand and reassure them that their needs are valid and continue to follow up with them.
- **Practice Patience.** Do not act hurried, like you do not 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. Build in extra time to assess their emotions and to work around the ways that emotion might be affecting their thinking.
- **Be Intentional.** Smile. Show that you care. Kids can tell when you are not being genuine. Model the respect you expect in return. If you are intentional with your approach in wanting to build better relationships with youth, the outcome will benefit not only you as an officer but the community in which you serve.

## What do Youth Need from the Police?

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. Below are some examples of what youth need when engaging with police and building trust:

- Mutual respect
- Trust
- Protection
- Understanding
- One-on-one conversations
- Compassion
- Follow-through
- Empathy
- Emotional intelligence
- An open mind
- Accountability
- Professionalism
- Communication and active listening
- Safety
- Patience
- Accessibility

## Conversation Starters to Engage and Interact with Youth

Approach youth with a calm demeanor. Youth are particularly attuned to both verbal and non-verbal judgment from adults. Whether you are in your car, on foot, or on a bike, engaging with young people in your community is essential to develop rapport. If patrolling in your car, take a few minutes to get out and engage in conversation. There may be instances where youth may not want to engage in conversation and that is okay; your efforts can still make an impact. Keep conversations lighthearted and friendly. Share your interests and experiences to connect on a personal and human level. Offer a glimpse into who you are as a person, not just as a police officer. Below are some informal conversation starters and topics.



# Ways to Engage Youth and Police in Conversation

## Young Children Conversation Starters/Topics

- Hi, my name is Officer (blank). What is your name?
- What school do you go to?
- What is your favorite subject?
- What do you like to do for fun?
- Tell me about this game you are playing. I would like to learn.
- Do you have any pets?
- What is your favorite snack or candy?
- Who is your favorite celebrity or sports figure?
- That is a nice bike!
- What would you like to do when you grow up?

**When engaging and talking to teens, friendly topics are appropriate, but be open to engaging in deeper conversations about community safety.**

- What grade are you in?
- What are your plans after you graduate?
- What kind of sports do you play?
- Can I join the game?
- Do you play any musical instruments?
- Are you involved in extracurricular activities at school?
  - If so, get the schedule of games, performances, etc. and show support at their events and if possible, find a way to be involved in these activities. For example, assist in fundraising, coaching, or volunteering in some capacity
- How can I be better involved in your community?

## Police-Community Engagement Partnerships

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. To help with programming, partner with community and stakeholder organizations and school systems to engage with youth and build rapport. By partnering with existing organizations and programs it creates a safe space and an opportunity for youth and police to engage in more formal conversations. Additionally, these discussions can lead to programming and events for the larger community. By involving youth in programming discussions, it builds ownership and longevity. Below are examples of how police and community partnerships can help foster positive relationships with youth.

- Host youth listening sessions or focus groups to talk about their questions about police and community safety concerns
- Develop a youth ride-along program
- Serve as a mentor in a local mentoring program
- Host and present at youth seminars on topics of interest such as social media
- Offer a bike rodeo with a local group
- Participate in afterschool activities and clubs
- Participate in workforce and career development programs
- Participate in Community Drives (clothes, shoes, back to school, etc.)
- Host a Community Block Party

## IACP Resources

- A. IACP [Community-Police Engagement Page](#)
- B. IACP Model Policy: [Media Relations](#)
- C. [IACP Policy Framework for Improved Community-Police Engagement](#)
- D. IACP Resource: [Practices in Modern Policing: Police-Youth Engagement](#)
- E. IACP Resource: [Effects of Adolescent Development on Policing](#)
- F. IACP [Law Enforcement Policy Resource Center](#)