Training teaches police officers techniques for interacting with neighborhood youth in ways that defuse hostilities and encourage dialogue.

MARK I. SINGER

POLICE LEARN TO WORK WITH NEIGHBORHOOD YOUTH TO CURB VIOLENCE

Police officers who patrol city streets often do not realize that many children and adolescents in those neighborhoods live every moment of their lives anxiously awaiting the next threat to their safety. The youths are hyper-alert to their environment and quick to react to any posture they perceive as a threat.

According to Mark I. Singer, Ph.D., professor of social work at Case’s Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, police officers who get tough with neighborhood youth who are not committing any crimes are increasing, not decreasing, the potential for conflict. The reason is that many of these young people have been exposed to violence, as victims and witnesses, and these experiences have conditioned their brains for a very fast fight-or-flight response—either of which can be dangerous.

Dr. Singer has been studying the effects of exposure to violence on children and adolescents for more than a decade. In sharing his expertise on violence prevention with the community, he conducts youth-focused police training with the Partnership for a Safer Cleveland, an agency that is dedicated to reducing youth violence. The training teaches police officers techniques for interacting with neighborhood youth in ways that defuse hostilities and encourage dialogue by providing officers with interpersonal skills that they can use in non-arrest situations. The program has trained more than 7,600 Cleveland police officers with a four-hour curriculum that includes a training video featuring police officers and adolescents who re-enact a scenario that was actually recorded during Dr. Singer’s field work.

“We teach the officers that they are more like the youths than they realize,” Dr. Singer says. “The youths have been exposed to violence, and the police have been exposed to violence. Their brains react similarly. They’re both ready for a potential conflict.

The interpersonal skills that we teach help reduce the potential of negative outcomes."

Dr. Singer, a national authority on youth violence, is also the co-director of the Center on Substance Abuse and Mental Illness at the Mandel School. Two of his other research projects that inspired the police training involve the study of violent behavior in severely emotionally disturbed children and the relationship between children’s threats of violence and violent behaviors.

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CREATIVE PLAY AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS IN CHILDREN

Giving children the time, space, and tools to play can aid them in developing important coping and problem-solving skills.

Groundbreaking research by Sandra W. Russ, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the Case College of Arts and Sciences, is helping to reshape how play is viewed by revealing the crucial role of play in overall child development.

While using play for therapeutic purposes, Dr. Russ found children expressing creativity as they played. Her research, which includes many collaborative studies with students, has revealed play to provide a window for learning about children’s emotional processes and its role in imaginative thinking, forming memories, coping, and developing empathy. Dr. Russ notes that children who exhibited more emotion and fantasy in their early play continued to be more creative in later years and developed better coping skills.

One study found that first and second graders who showed high levels of imagination in their play scored higher on a test measuring their ability to adapt to stressful situations in fifth and sixth grade. Because fantasy play requires children to create different roles and voices, it is practice for divergent thinking and problem solving. How well the youths coped was measured by having students share how they would handle eight different situations such as forgetting their lunch at home, dealing with someone who was teasing them, or what they would do if they lost a book they needed for a test. Children who had more imagination in early play thought of more things to do in these situations and were more creative on creativity tests.

The Affect in Play Scale, which Dr. Russ pioneered, measures the range and kinds of emotions that children exhibit while engaged in a five-minute pretend play session. The test measures 11 categories of positive and negative emotions children can use in play. This standardized measure is critical in developing play intervention and play prevention programs that can be evaluated empirically.

Dr. Russ stresses the connection between affectivity expressed through play and children’s social and academic success. “Pretend play really is an adaptive resource for kids. It helps them in other areas. Over-scheduling really robs children of time that they need to do things that are important developmentally. They also need to have relaxation time where they don’t do much of anything—just like adults,” she notes.

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