

Overview: Importance of Police-Youth Interactions and the “Interactions with Youth” Policy by Cleveland Division of Police (CDP)

Background – Why Does How We Police Kids & Teens Matter?

Police regularly encounter children and youth, whether through informal stops, warn and release, formal arrests, or children witnessing interactions between police and their peers, parents or other family members. How youth perceive and the degree to which they trust the police and the criminal justice system is largely informed by their personal encounters with law enforcement. Neuroscience sheds light on how a teen’s brain development leads them to prefer, and be more likely to engage in, risky behaviors, and have less ability to anticipate consequences and make decisions that require an understanding of the future. The legal system has increasingly recognized how kids are developmentally less mature than adults and require special legal and procedural protections and opportunities for rehabilitation. Police encounters with youth can be challenging for all these reasons.

What is a “Developmentally-Appropriate” Approach to Policing?

Effectively working with children and youth requires special skills, knowledge, and practices. A “developmentally-appropriate” approach demonstrates a general understanding of the unique social, emotional, physical, neurological, behavioral, and moral aspects of development in childhood through adolescence, in order to effectively use age-appropriate communication, de-escalation and intervention tactics on minors. This includes an understanding of trauma and how childhood trauma can impact police interactions with youth, as well as implicit biases and how the intersection of race, age and gender can impact police encounters with youth. For example, studies show Black children, especially Black boys 10-years old and older, are seen as older (on average 4½ years older) and less innocent than White children, which can negatively impact how police perceive and treat them.

What is the “Interactions with Youth” Policy (GPO) and Why is it Important?

The CDP “Interactions with Youth” policy, adopted in 2021, coupled with new age-appropriate protections in a number of other CDP policies (see e.g. Crisis Intervention, Use of Force, De-Escalation, Search & Seizure, Interrogation and Miranda, Investigatory Stops, Probable Cause, and Bias-Free policing), is groundbreaking in clarifying CDP’s vision and commitment to fostering positive interactions with children and youth. Policy is critical because it reflects the values and priorities of the agency; it provides clarity and guidance for police officers in the field, along with appropriate training; and it holds systems accountable to the expectations we have for these interactions with children and youth. Combined, these policies reflect an understanding of adolescent development, trauma and how the combination of age and race bias can be especially challenging in the context of police-youth encounters. These policies offer an opportunity to help improve encounters with our young people while ensuring safety.

What Does the CDP “Interactions with Youth” Policy Actually Require?

Importantly, this policy is proactive, offering guidance about what officers should or must do, rather than just noting what they can’t do. Age-specific guidance and procedures are provided in a number of areas (along with training), beginning with a general requirement that “officers shall conduct law enforcement activities without discrimination on the basis of a youth’s demographic category” and interactions to include (Sec. 1.B.2):

“Approaching youth in a calm and respectful manner; Explaining the purpose of the interaction in an age-appropriate manner; Not cursing at or using derogatory language to refer to youth; and Not making fun of or engaging in demeaning or humiliation tactics.”

Other highlights for the youth policy include:

- **Investigatory stops:** A youth’s “behavioral responses alone cannot provide the basis for probable cause.”
- **Interviews and Interrogations:** Requires “Administering Juvenile Miranda Warning and Waiver”, providing breaks and limiting total interrogation time to ensure “voluntary, non-coercive, and non-traumatic results.”
- **Redirection and Referrals:** “Officers shall not arrest a juvenile under the age of 13 for a non-violent offense” and officers are encouraged to choose alternatives to arrest and to make referrals for rehabilitation and other youth programs and services.
- **Arrest and Custody:** Officers “shall attempt to notify juvenile’s parent...and document all attempts.”
- **Medical Attention:** Officers “shall seek medical attention” for: any serious injury, after use of taser or OC spray, suicide risk, intoxication, or when a youth requests medical attention.
- **Handcuffing:** Officers shall consider “handcuffs may trigger a traumatic response” in assessing whether to use on a child.
- **De-escalation/Use of Force:** “Age-appropriate response to youth when safe and feasible” is required. “Officers shall only use force when necessary, proportional, and objectively reasonable” and shall consider “perceived age and emotional condition” in addition to body mass and physical build.
- **Special circumstances and other areas include:** Arrest of Children with Disabilities; School; Parent Arrest (in the presence of children); Youth in Crisis (including Suicide Risk/Attempt); Human Trafficking of youth; and Domestic Violence involving youth.