



FORMING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUTH IN THE COMMUNITY

Changing Attitudes and Fostering Mutual Respect

While the focus is often on youth changing their attitudes towards law enforcement, it is equally important for law enforcement to change their attitudes towards youth. Respect is a give and take kind of relationship, and law enforcement officials need to respect the youth as citizens, much like the youth need to respect law enforcement as authority figures. It is up to law enforcement officials in every community to reach out to youth and ensure they understand what they are there to do. Below are some best practices to address these issues, but first please review and answer the questions below to assess how these will apply to you as a law enforcement official.



- *Have you ever received a negative response from youth in the community, despite you just doing your job?* (Yes or No)
- *Do you want to improve relationships with the youth in your community, but don't know which avenue to take first?* (Yes or No)
- *Do you already have a strong positive relationship with the youth in the community, but want to assist a fellow law enforcement official in improving theirs?* (Yes or No)

If you answered yes to any of those questions, continue reading below. If none of this applies to you, you are still encouraged to direct anyone who may be of benefit to this resource.

Best Practices for Forming Relationships

- **Understand that attitudes may have been previously shaped**
Attitudes many youth hold against law enforcement may have been shaped by family members, peers, and bad experiences with corrupt officials. Be mindful and show patience when dealing with these youth, and show them that law enforcement is there to help and not hurt.
- **Give respect to gain respect**
Approaching every youth you come across, especially teens, with a certain level of respect is necessary in order to get it in return. If you see suspicious activity, try not to assume they are up to no good. Instead, try to be casual and polite to figure out what is going on, while avoiding sounding accusatory. Be sure to ask questions, but be aware of how you're presenting those questions. Some examples include;

*How is it going? How is your day going?
Are you okay? Do you need any help?*



After respect has been established, youth will respond better to questions that are more direct, such as;

What's going on here?

Could you tell me why you're here?

- **Be aware of personal experiences**

Understand that in the case of some frequent runaways, being out in the open (such as in the streets, by a creek, etc.) is safer than if they were at home. While it is easy to think that returning them is the ideal option, try to figure out the real reason they ran away. You would not want to endanger them further if they are being abused at home.

- **Be an active listener**

If a youth is being abused at home, you can't expect them to immediately open up and share what is happening. Being an active listener and trying to find some common ground is the best way to earn their trust and get them to open up. If you come from some relatable experience, do not be afraid to share that information. Some youth need to know that they aren't alone in what they are going through.

- **Strike up a normal conversation**

If you are out on patrol and come across some youth you may already know in the community, strike up a normal conversation to allow others to see that you are approachable and friendly. Many times, youth are simply intimidated by the presence of law enforcement, and don't realize that you are all just normal community members as well.

- **Support fellow law enforcement officials in this effort**

If you already have a close relationship with the youth in your community, do what you can to help improve the relationship for your colleagues. In some communities, the Tribal police department may have a positive relationship with the youth in the community, but the state troopers or BIA agents do not. As the one with the trust from the community, partnering with others will help build trust.

- **Participate in community events and get involved in local youth programs**

Attend community events such as powwows, holiday events, etc., where many of the youth in the community will be present. Increase your own visibility in all types of settings, not just when out on patrol. Getting involved in local youth programs is a great way to develop rapport with youth. Check out the resource on "How Your Tribal PD Can Get Involved in Youth Programs" in the Tribal Database.

- **Look for opportunities to be a guest speaker in local schools**

If there are no opportunities, reach out to the school to create one. Speaking in front of youth in a classroom setting is a great way to help them understand your role in the community.

These are just a few ideas of what you can do to promote a positive relationship between your local Tribal Police Department and the youth in your community. Developing these positive relationships now is the key to having a more united, cohesive community in the future. While it will not solve all of the problems regarding youth attitudes towards law enforcement, it is certainly a way to get started.

Special thanks to Detective Julian Garcia of the Tohono O'odham Nation for his contribution to this resource. Detective Garcia believes "Anyone can relate to anyone, we're all human, we all have a story. Find your connection and you can watch their young mind start absorbing what you tell them."