



Working Together in the Pandemic: Tips for Supporting Youth and Families in a Time of Crisis

The COVID-19 crisis is impacting every youth and family in some way or another. Youth involved in the juvenile justice system are particularly impacted by the pandemic. Along with the many stressors and challenges they face ordinarily, these youth now struggle with increased worry about their health and safety, the health and safety of their friends and loved ones, and possible grief and loss.

The impact of COVID-19 is compounded by justice-involved youth's limited or inconsistent access to support networks in their homes, schools, and communities as well as to adult and peer role models and mentors. Youth in residential facilities may not be able to have in-person visits with caregivers. For many justice-involved youth, these losses, both literally and figuratively, of important relationships may serve as reminders for prior traumatic experiences.

When working with youth in this pandemic, there are several important considerations to keep in mind, including:

- Expecting an increase in difficult behaviors as youth grapple with a rise in uncomfortable emotions and a decrease in ways to cope with those emotions such as a loss in social support due to social distancing.
- Understanding that as youth are processing new challenges, abrupt changes, and healthcare concerns, they are still looking to trusted adults for support and modeling of effective responses and coping strategies.
- Knowing that every interaction with a youth is a chance to create meaningful connection, increase a sense of safety, and increase a feeling of empowerment.
- Staying focused on managing your own stress while interacting with youth is extremely important because your management of stress helps create calm and a sense of safety for youth. When youth feel an increased sense of safety, they are less likely to exhibit challenging behaviors that make it more difficult to function.

When working with families of justice-involved youth, there are several important considerations to keep in mind, including:

- Parents and families may have heightened concerns about the health and safety of their child who is in a residential setting or incarcerated, especially if they have limited contact.
- Many families of youth in the juvenile justice system have pre-existing stressors that have been exacerbated by this crisis, such as homelessness, food insecurity, poverty, and lack of access to quality health and mental health care.
- If your role involves direct contact with family members, you may be in a position to increase caregivers' sense of calm and safety by providing information and a space to be heard, as well as validating their concerns and sharing resources. In times of crisis, the feeling that one has been heard can go a very long way for families under stress.

Questions to Consider When Working with Justice-Involved Youth and Their Families

- What steps are you taking to contribute to the health and safety of youth and their parents or caregivers?
- Are youth expressing themselves or their feelings about this crisis through creative, non-traditional ways such as through drawing, music, or other creative arts?
- What are you doing to maintain a sense of connection to the youth you're working with, even if that connection can't be in person? Are there ways to use both traditional and virtual communication with youth? How can you use youth's strengths and interests to connect with them during this time?
- What steps can you take to keep parents and caregivers regularly updated about children in residential facilities? What virtual ways can you use to maintain connections between youth and their families?

- Are there resources you can provide to parents and caregivers who need additional support?
- Are you taking steps to manage your own stress as you're interacting with youth and families?

Dos and Don'ts of Working with Youth and Families in a Time of Crisis

DO listen and help each youth and family member sort out their thoughts and feelings in a way that they feel is most helpful – listening carefully and supportively to youths and family members actually saves more time and effort than it takes.

DON'T offer generic reassurance or coping tactics, false hope or encouragement, or promises that you cannot fulfill.

DO learn what has happened in the lives of youths and family members so that you can understand where they're coming from.

DON'T make assumptions about what has happened or why certain events have particular meaning for each individual.

DO learn and support what each youth and each family member hold as their core values.

DON'T assume that a youth or family member has no morals or positive values.

DO learn about the specific ways the pandemic has affected the youth's and family members' personal life and their personal relationships.

DON'T overlook the importance of personal relationships and activities that have been negatively impacted or assume that those relationships and activities are lost forever or beyond repair.

DO nonjudgmentally acknowledge distress expressed by youths or family members as understandable in the circumstances and relate it to their core values.

DON'T provide simplistic reassurance or advice or attempt to convince them to feel or think differently.

DO creatively build on youths' and family members' strengths, interests, and talents to brainstorm modified or alternative coping tactics.

DON'T teach only generic pre-packaged coping tactics such as deep breathing, (which can be very effective) but tailor coping strategies to personality, culture, and preferences.

DO identify and reinforce ways youths give to and receive from family and personal support systems, including faith-based supports.

DON'T assume that a youth's personal relationships are supportive and overlook possible areas of conflict or tension.

DO provide links to culturally sensitive and evidence-based online resources consistent with youths' and family members' specific goals.

DON'T generically suggest online resources that are not directly relevant to them or have no evidence base.

DO identify and reinforce ways each youth and family member is engaging in practical self-care, and acknowledge any small steps to doing so, including the interest in self-care.

DON'T suggest simplistic "solutions" or coping tactics that are unrealistic or that are not tailored to the individual.

DO make sure youths and family members leave every conversation with you with a thought or tool that provides a sense of a way forward.

DON'T treat any conversation with a youth as pointless or worthless.

DO establish a practical way for youths and families to stay in contact with you, consistent with professional boundaries.

DON'T overlook or ignore them because you're too busy or focused on something/someone else. Check in with them regularly.



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