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De-escalating juvenile Aggression

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Juveniles are not simply little adults, and the techniques for de-escalating aggressive juveniles are different from the techniques used to deal with adults.

This unique status of juveniles has been recognized and codified in various special protections under state and federal law.

Juveniles are unlike adults physically, psychologically, and socially, and the aggression they display toward authority figures is significantly different from the aggression displayed by adults. Consequently, effective techniques used to de-escalate juvenile aggression are different from those used to de-escalate adults.

When police officers come into contact with an aggressive juvenile, their goal should be to de-escalate the juvenile's aggression quickly and safely. Solving the juvenile's problem comes later in the officer-juvenile interaction.

This article describes professionally evaluated skills that law enforcement officers have used to de-escalate juvenile aggression.¹

Juveniles Are Different—Socially, Physically, and Psychologically

Understanding when, why, and how juveniles are likely to escalate or become aggressive is critical to being able to de-escalate their aggression. Physically, juveniles, and especially adolescents, are going through hormonal growth spurts. What is not so obvious is that those hormones are internally producing drugs that juveniles have no control over, and an outcome of this hormonal growth can be aggressive behavior.

Psychologically, juveniles have less functional activity than adults in the part of the brain that organizes and controls behavior. Teenage brains have greater activity in the part of the brain that associates external stimuli with emotional responses. The outcome of this psychological makeup results in juveniles reacting differently from adults. Officers should be neither surprised nor annoyed when agitated juveniles act out quickly, emotionally, and irrationally.

Socialization is an important part of the juvenile life, yet some of the most important socialization factors such as family, environment, and exposure to violence are completely beyond the control of a juvenile. Friendship is a critical part of socialization and saving face in front of friends is very important. When officers confront a juvenile in front of his or her peers, the juvenile is likely to act up and mouth off to avoid appearing weak.

Like adults, juveniles may act aggressively under the influence of a drug. It must be remembered that the de-escalation techniques described in this article will not work on a juvenile under the influence of any drug. De-escalation techniques require a degree of cognitive ability that simply does not exist in a juvenile under the influence of a drug and, therefore, de-escalation techniques are not recommended.

Why Juveniles Become Aggressive

All juveniles have four needs that, when not met, can lead to aggression:

- Love and belonging
- Power and importance
- Fun and pleasure
- Freedom and choice

When juveniles engage in errant or illegal acts, officers have a duty to intervene and may have to stop a juvenile from trying to fulfill one or more of those

needs. Recognizing that such intervention is likely to frustrate or even escalate a juvenile's aggression, an officer needs to know how to place limits on those needs that will be accepted by the juvenile.

Love and belonging can be expressed in many different forms. Be careful to not make judgments about what a juvenile does that gives him or her a sense of love and belonging. Juveniles are often very good at reading adults, including their judgments. Although multiple body piercing designed to show love or friendship may not receive an adult's approval, it may be a juvenile's chosen means of expressing love or belonging. In order to win the trust of the juvenile it is important that the officer does not communicate personal biases against the juvenile's lawful expressions.

Juveniles are keenly aware of power and importance. They've seen it exercised over them throughout their childhood, and they want a taste of it for themselves. Taking away what power they may have or minimizing their feelings of importance (especially in front of their peers) will likely escalate their aggression. Officers can empower a juvenile to make a better choice and act more responsibly. Encouraging, praising, explaining, or showing a juvenile what you want him or her to do works far more effectively than giving orders. The potential for escalating aggression is reduced by empowering a youth to act responsibly, rather than the exercising power over the youth.

Juveniles seek new forms of fun and pleasure as they exit childhood. They want to experience new thrills that sometimes require police intervention. Some juveniles have had few limits placed on them or enforced consistently and, therefore, when an officer tries to limit their fun and pleasure, it's not surprising that there's resistance. However, juveniles will

often accept limits when they are explained to them. In the officer-juvenile intervention it is important to explain that the limit being imposed is temporary and the possible consequences for not complying are explained in simple terms to which juveniles can relate.

Finally, there are times when an officer will have to restrict a juvenile's freedom or limit their choices. This can cause frustration and prompt loud opposition because juveniles often do not always recognize the difference between short- and long-term consequences. It is necessary to remind the juvenile of what is often obvious to the adult: the restriction is only temporary, their compliance will help, and opposition might make the problem worse. If it's possible to give a juvenile a choice between lesser evils ("Take a ticket, or a tow truck will impound the vehicle. The choice is yours."), doing so will allow the juvenile to retain some degree of freedom and to make his or her own choice.

Adult vs. Juvenile Aggression

There are three major differences between adult and juvenile aggression. First, adults have a much greater ability to control their aggression. This comes from experience and maturity and an understanding that the law limits aggressive acts. Juveniles, lacking experience in life and the maturity that comes with experience, have much less ability to control aggression. Adults generally accept limits as necessary forms of social control designed for everyone's safety. Juveniles are at a stage of life where they are learning through the testing of limits and they sometimes act with little regard for safety.

Second, juveniles tend to exhibit emotional aggression, whereas adults tend to exhibit deliberate aggression. However, juveniles can exhibit either form. Emotional aggression is usually an out-of-control act that is often annoying and loud; it is almost always associated with one or more of their four needs not being met. Emotional aggression is often quickly ignited and can occur repeatedly over a short period of time. An example of emotional aggression is a youth who becomes increasingly frustrated to the point of exploding and lashing out at anyone or everyone. Who or what the youth is upset at is not necessarily clear.

Adults more often display deliberate aggression. Deliberate aggression is often a criminal act with specific intent to do harm to a person or property. The source of the adult's anguish is typically clear to observers.

Juvenile aggression is much more volatile and unpredictable than adult aggression. Therefore, it can be significantly more dangerous. For that reason, it is important to have a clear and simple model to follow when attempting to de-escalate juvenile aggression.

Adult De-escalation Techniques Don't Work Well on Juveniles

Aggressive juveniles neither think nor respond as adults do, and they lack the experience and maturity to make adult decisions. Adults are more likely to respond to verbal commands and show some degree of respect for officers, whereas juveniles tend to question, challenge, and confront commands from adult authority figures.

Some juveniles are smaller and more vulnerable to injury from the restraints and takedowns effectively used on adults. Even more important is the fact that juveniles, once in pain, experience an adrenaline dump that often results in greater resistance, louder altercations, and a more dangerous confrontation. Pain actually escalates juvenile aggression.

Law enforcement officers can expand their tools and skills to include a juvenile-specific de-escalation model as well as physical restraints that effectively restrain and take down without causing pain. Such techniques, which must be used properly and carefully, usually rely upon the principles of leverage, balance, and momentum to gain and exercise control without resorting to pressure points, pain, muscling, or other overpowering techniques. The whole point of de-escalating juvenile aggression is

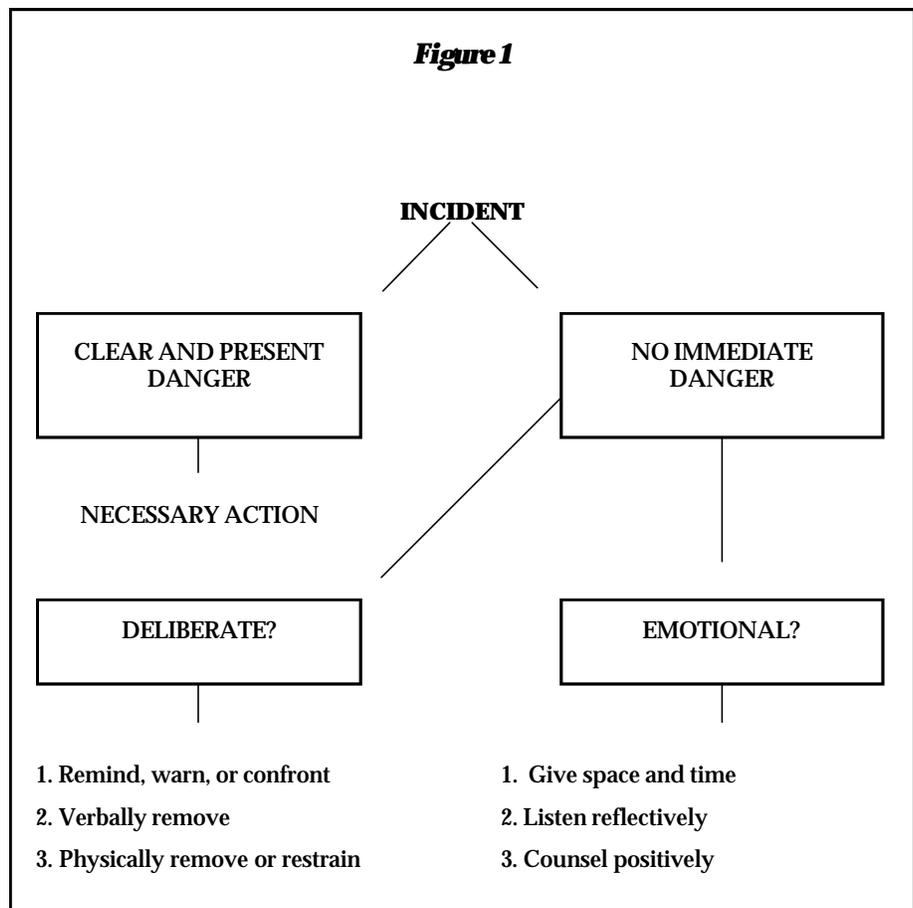
to help youth out of their emotional pain while safely controlling the situation.

A Juvenile Aggression Control Model

The flow chart in figure 1 (page 34) illustrates a model that is initially no different than a basic threat assessment: is the incident a clear and present danger, or is there no immediate danger? If there is a clear and present danger, the officer must take the necessary action. There is no attempt to de-escalate juvenile aggression at this time. But if there is no immediate danger, the officer is asked to make one additional assessment: is the aggression displayed by the juvenile deliberate, or is it emotional? The assessment of the type of anger displayed dictates the appropriate and effective de-escalation techniques. The de-escalation techniques are specific to the type of anger shown and are not interchangeable.

De-escalating Deliberate Juvenile Aggression

Deliberate aggression on the part of juvenile is clearly directed with specific intent to harm. A series of increasingly more direct techniques can work to de-escalate juvenile aggression.



First Step: An officer can remind (subtle verbal hint that the juvenile's action is unacceptable), warn (inform the juvenile of a consequence if there's no compliance), or confront the juvenile (clearly and firmly state the problem and an instruction). An officer can use any or all of the techniques in an attempt to de-escalate the juvenile; but starting with the least threatening (remind) takes only a few seconds.

For example, an officer speaking to a deliberately aggressive juvenile could progress through the three techniques by saying the following:

Remind: "Do you really need to yell for me to hear you?"

Warn: "If you continue to yell I may have to cite you for disturbing the peace."

Confront: "You're yelling and disturbing the peace. Stop yelling now or I'll arrest you."

Second Step: If a deliberately aggressive juvenile does not begin to de-escalate after being reminded, warned, or confronted, the next least intrusive intervention is to verbally remove the juvenile. This is a verbal order to leave with the officer accompanying the juvenile.

Third Step: Not every juvenile will de-escalate, even after officers attempt to use several tools. In such cases, the juvenile may have to be physically removed or restrained.

De-escalating Emotional Juvenile Aggression

Emotional aggression is a common form of juvenile aggression. The aggression can be start quickly and it can involve lashing out at everyone. It is usually an out-of-control act, often annoying and loud, and can occur repeatedly over a short period of time.

First Step: Give the juvenile sufficient personal space and time to emotionally vent. Crowding the juvenile or forcing a conversation at this emotionally agitated time will only escalate the anger. Closely

watch the juvenile and provide reassurance that you are there to protect them and that you are ready to talk when they want. Much to the surprise of officers trained in these skills, most juveniles quickly de-escalate when given some time and space in the officer's presence.

Second Step: Once the juvenile has the time and space to calm down, the next step is reflective listening. Reflective listening is a participatory process where the officer succinctly paraphrases or repeats the juvenile words. Literal reflective listening will sound very strange. Hearing every single word repeated back is not a normal, everyday occurrence. However, that is part of the technique; repeating exactly what was said sounds strange to an untrained ear and it distracts the juvenile from his or her anger. Exceptional practitioners of reflective listening can paraphrase a juvenile's words and can even engage in a conversation as they restate what the juvenile tells them.

Reflective listening is probably the most effective skill an officer can learn to de-escalate emotional juvenile aggression. It does four things: (1) it encourages and allows the juvenile to verbally vent frustration, (2) it allows an officer to check the accuracy of what the juvenile says, (3) it allows the juvenile to use the officer as a sounding board, and (4) it affords the juvenile some time to hear what he or she said and think about it.

Example:

Youth: "You damn cops are always hassling me! Why can't you just get outta my face and leave me alone!"

Officer: "We're always hassling you? You want me to back up and leave you alone?"

OR

"I hear you. The cops are always bothering you. You don't want to be hassled and I don't want to hassle you either."

If reflective listening is used effectively, a juvenile displaying emotional aggression will vent quickly and may begin to

tell officers about the situation that led to the aggression. Reflective listening seldom lasts more than a few minutes. During that time, the juvenile will signal his or her readiness to engage in a more constructive conversation. The signal is often a long pause after a period of reflective listening or the juvenile may ask, "Why are you repeating everything I say?" or something to that effect. That is the cue to begin counseling positively.

Third Step: Counseling positively requires officers to prompt juveniles to suggest some acceptable options to dealing with the immediate situation that led to the aggression. Juveniles are likely to take the easy way out and say, "I don't know," giving the officers an opportunity to suggest some possible positive actions. Note that the officers are not to solve the juveniles' problems or tell them what to do. The objective is to get the juveniles to take responsibility for their actions and help them help themselves. This builds the juveniles' trust in the officers and confidence in themselves.

The Future Need

Demographics experts predict that juvenile arrests for violent crimes will increase rapidly in coming years, given current population growth projections and trends, which means officers will be encountering a growing number of aggressive juveniles. The skills described in this model are designed to help officers de-escalate juvenile aggression and keep juveniles, officers, and bystanders safe.

For more information on de-escalating juvenile aggression, call the author at 877-297-8654, or write to him at justice@nationaljustice.com.

¹ Denise C. Herz, "Improving Police Encounters with Juveniles: Does Training Make a Difference?" *Justice Research and Policy*, vol. 3, no. 2 (fall 2001).